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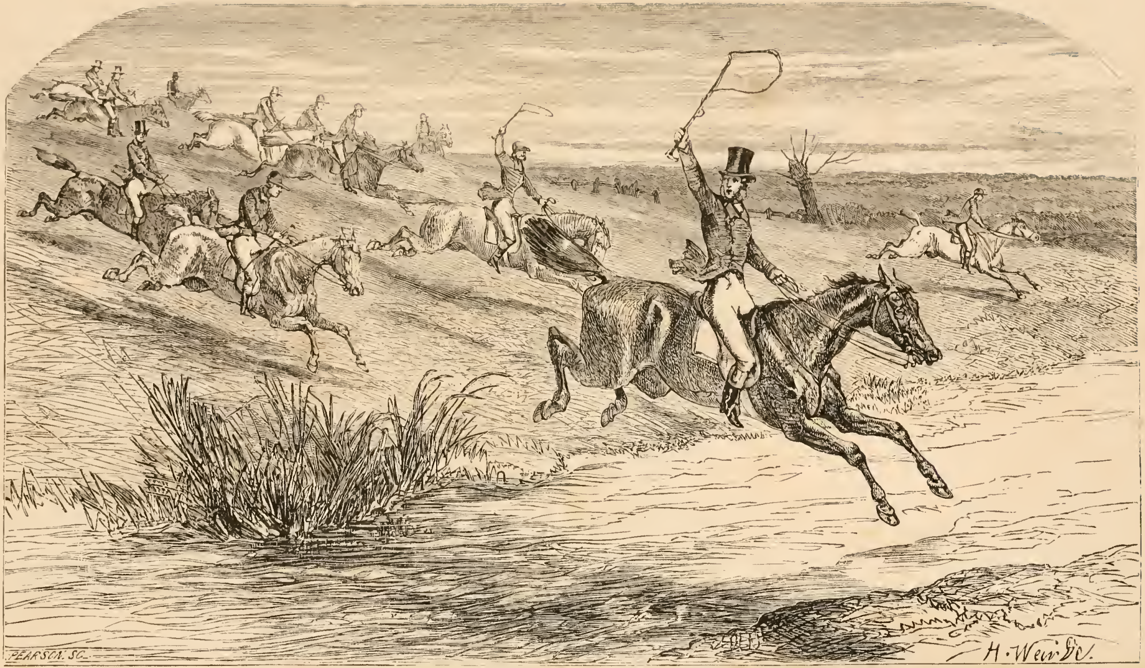
PEARSON. SC.
H. Weir Del.

SIR FRANCIS CLEARING THE BROOK.

Horlock, Knightley William

THE

MASTER OF THE HOUNDS.

BY "SCRUTATOR,"

AUTHOR OF "THE COUNTRY GENTLEMAN," "RECOLLECTIONS OF A FOX HUNTER," "HORSE AND THE HOUNDS," ETC.

PEARSON SC.
H. Weir

LONDON:
CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.

1863.

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TO

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

THE EARL OF STAMFORD AND WARRINGTON,

ETC. ETC.

My dear Lord,

By the following Tale, in which the characters are depicted from real life, I have endeavoured to show that Fox-hunters are not men of one idea only, or of one pursuit; and that Masters of Fox-hounds do not, as they have been grossly misrepresented, *live for Fox-hunting alone.* As an exemplification of the contrary being the fact, I could adduce numerous instances; but need go no further than point to your Lordship, now occupying the first position in the hunting world, as Master of the Quorn Country, and may affirm, without flattery, that the encomium bestowed on your great predecessor, the celebrated Hugo Meynell, may with equal truth be applied to yourself:—"He was, indeed, as much the *répandu* of the *élite* of Grosvenor Square—as much at home at St. James's—as he was at Quorndon or at Ashby pastures." However bold and adventurous in the

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field, Fox-hunters of the present day, like the knights of old, are distinguished for their chivalrous devotion to the fair sex, fully appreciating the *agrémens* of polished society, with due attention to the other duties of social life; of which the sceptic may be satisfied, who will follow the gay Meltonian from the field to the fireside, when

ἁμα ταῖς πανοπλίαις θρασυκάρδιαν ἀγρευτὴρ ἐκδύεται.

In the hope that your Lordship may not consider your kind patronage ill conferred on this unpretending work,

I have the honour to remain,

Very faithfully yours,

THE AUTHOR.

THE

MASTER OF THE HOUNDS.

CHAPTER I.

It was on the morning of the 1st of November, 18— (the fox-hunter's opening day for the season), that a gay party of sportsmen, in their bright scarlet costume, were gathered round the breakfast table of Mr. Beauchamp, of Bampton House, a gentleman of high descent, and large landed property, in one of the midland counties. Bampton House being of large dimensions, many friends were invited the previous evening to dine and sleep there, in readiness for the ensuing gala day; accordingly, about half-past nine on that auspicious morning (for so it proved, although not exactly with "a southerly wind and a cloudy sky"), a goodly assemblage of choice and daring spirits thronged the hospitable board of Mr. Beauchamp, all eager to dispatch their morning meal, and prepare themselves for the coming fray.

On the sideboard, besides the usual dishes on such occasions, of ham, beef, cold fowls, game, &c., divers bottles of cherry brandy, Curasçoa, and Maraschino, stood invitingly displayed.

Of this goodly company, whilst so engaged, we may take this opportunity of noticing a few of the most distinguished characters; and first of all, as standing by fox-hunting etiquette at the head of his brothers in pink, the Master of the Hounds, William Beauchamp, now in his twenty-fourth year (living with his father), to whom the management of the pack was now entrusted. He was tall in stature, though rather slightly formed, yet of great activity and strength, and a fearless though careful rider. He possessed a frank and manly countenance, by many called handsome, with a fine curly head of dark hair, which, of course, in the eyes of the fair sex passed for something; and withal, not to dwell too long on a description of his personal or mental qualities, he was a general favourite with all classes, high and low, rich and poor; and to his decided popularity the cause of fox-hunting in that district was undoubtedly indebted for its progressive influence.

Although young to occupy the position of master of fox-hounds, he had been brought up from boyhood to the profession, and initiated by his father into the mysteries of the noble science, which, truth to say, proved a far more attractive study than Latin or Greek; and yet William Beauchamp had made such progress in the dead languages at the university, that he took his degree with flying colours, and, as his friend Bob Conyers used to affirm, he would have been in the first flight, but for a prolonged liver attack, which at last became so serious, that he was recommended by his doctor and tutor also to give up reading, and take again to the saddle; "and a deuced good change, too," said Bob, "or there had been a capital fellow spoilt."

Mr. Beauchamp, the father, was one of the old school—cheerful, generous, kind-hearted, and much given to hospitality. In personal appearance he was about the middle height, well formed, and of a fresh complexion; he had been one of the handsomest men of his time; but when this tale commences, having nearly reached the age of man, he had become less elegant in form, and feeling his years, handed over all authority in the hunting establishment to his only son, between whom and his father the most affectionate cordiality existed, proceeding from a similarity of disposition and pursuits. One daughter, Constance, a pretty girl of nineteen, completed the family circle, Mrs. Beauchamp having been dead some years.

Constance, although highly accomplished in arts and sciences feminine, was a superior horsewoman, possessing, with a beautiful seat and hand on horseback, nerve sufficient to mount and manage the most refractory animal of the genus equine. Her figure, rather under than over the general standard of women, was cast in Nature's most perfect mould; her features regular, and of the Grecian order, with a profusion of dark, glossy hair, and finely-arched eyebrows. In society she was rather reserved, although of deep and affectionate feelings; but with her friends and relations joyous and communicative. Utterly devoid of affectation, she was generally beloved by her neighbours, and the most particular pet of her father and brother, as well as of Bob Conyers, to whom I must next introduce my readers.

Bob (as he was usually called) was a bachelor, aged about forty, tall, stout, of a merry countenance and goodly mien, passionately devoted to his favourite amusement of fox-hunting; and it may suffice to say of the individual man, that he had the *entrée* of nearly every gentleman's house in the county, in which he was ever greeted with a most welcome reception from the seniors, and with rapturous glee by the junior members of the numerous families; in short, no dinner party was considered quite complete without the presence of this highly-favoured son of Nimrod. He was also greatly patronised by the ladies, having a good voice and tolerable ear for music, being also a graceful dancer and cheerful partner in a ball-room; and in lack of other occupation during the *dead* months, that is (in Bob's vocabulary) the summer season, he was occasionally seen patiently sitting down at a lady's work-table, with a piece of worsted-work in hand! Bob possessed a most versatile genius. He could discuss politics with the members of parliament, quote Latin and Greek with the scholar, divinity with the clergyman, small talk with the young ladies; and drink tea and play cards with the old ones. Shakespeare, Byron, and Moore, his favourite poets, were ready at his beck and call;—yet he was a first-rate sportsman and rider notwithstanding, a capital shot, good cricketer and billiard player, a formidable opponent with the gloves, and perfect master of the broad-sword exercise. With these and a few other accomplishments and embellishments of mind and person, it was a matter of wonder to all his friends that Bob remained still in single blessedness, particularly as his penchant for women and children was so notorious. But the secret lay here;—Bob was too poor and considerate to marry any woman without money, and too proud to marry any one with.

Opposite to Bob at the breakfast table (and opposite to him in almost every particular) sat Richard Vernon, the eldest son of Mr. Vernon, of Leighton Hall, the nearest neighbour, although not the most agreeable one, to Mr. Beauchamp. Richard, although at school and college with his son, was the reverse of William in disposition and feelings; and the two young men, although from early acquaintance long and intimately known to each other, could never be considered friends. Richard was a man of the world—gay and dissipated; insinuating in manners, agreeable in conversation, and strikingly from the sea, and the sharp tap of reckless night-birds that flung themselves at the glasses. It concerned a man called Dowse, once an intimate friend of Fenwick, now a waterman at Portsmouth, believing that the guilt of blood is on his head, and finding no rest either at Portsmouth or Gosport Hard.

. . . 'And if anybody was to come to you and say, "I know the Javva currents," don't you listen to him; for those currents is never yet known to mortal man. Sometimes they're here, sometimes they're there, but they never runs less than five knots an hour through and among those islands of the Eastern Archipelagus. There's reverse currents in the Gulf of Boni—and that's up north in Celebes—that no man can explain; and through all those Javva passages from the Bali Narrows, Dutch Gut, and Ombay, which I take it is the safest, they chop and they change, and they banks the tides fust on one shore and then on another, till your ship's tore in two. I've come through the Bali Narrows, stern first, in the heart o' the south-east monsoon, with a sou'-sou'-west wind blowing atop of the northerly flood, and our skipper said he wouldn't do it again, not for all Jamrach's. You've heard o' Jamrach's, sir?'

'Yes; and was Dowse stationed in the Bali Narrows?' I said.

'No, he was not at Bali, but much more east o' them passages, and that's Flores Strait, at the east end o' Flores. It's all on the way south to Australia when you're running through that Eastern Archipelagus. Sometimes you go through Bali Narrows if you're full-powered, and sometimes through Flores Strait, so as to stand south at once, and fetch round Timor, keeping well clear o' the Sahul Bank. Elseways, if you aren't full-powered, why it stands to reason you go round by the Ombay Passage, keeping careful to the north side. You understand that, sir?'

I was not full-powered, and judged it safer to keep to the north side—of Silence.

'And on Flores Strait, in the fairway between Adonare Island and the mainland, they put Dowse in charge of a screw-pile Light called the Wurlee Light. It's less than a mile across the head of Flores Strait. Then it opens out to ten or twelve mile for Solor Strait, and then it narrows again to a three-mile gut, with a topplin' flamin' volcano by it. That's old Loby Toby by Loby Toby Strait, and if you keep his Light and the Wurlee Light in a line you won't take much harm, not on the darkest night. That's what Dowse told me, and I can well believe him, knowing these seas myself; but you must ever be mindful of the currents. And there they put Dowse, since he was the only man that that Dutch government which owns Flores could find that would go to Wurlee and tend a fixed Light. Mostly they uses Dutch and Italians; Englishmen of the other beauties, threatening to kick Dick out of the room.

"'Harkee, Markham!' said Dick; 'that you can't do—so don't try that game; but as breakfast is half over, and we have ten miles to covert, I will give you twenty minutes to dress and finish your breakfast, and not a minute beyond that time will I wait.' The Captain, relieved of his difficulties, soon made his appearance down stairs; and here he comes, with his well-curled locks and white scented handkerchief in hand, as if he were entering a ball-room. Confound the fellow! say I, and all such nondescripts; begad, if a fox smelt half as strong as he does, hounds would never be off the line. There, now he is in his element, making fine speeches about nothing to Constance. How charming—how bewitching she looks in her riding costume! a perfect Diana! and all that sort of trash; but there is one comfort, Will, Con has too much good sense to be taken now with such confounded flummery. A year ago she thought differently, until I took the liberty of opening her eyes a little to the Captain's true character; but, saving his epaulettes, and being heir-expectant to a baronetcy, Vernon is a much more dangerous man with young girls than the life-guardsman, for both are playing the same game. Dick is a devilish handsome fellow, with lots of small talk and soft *sawder*, and such winning, flattering ways with women, that, by Jove! Will, he is a dangerous fellow, and not to be sneezed at!"

"Perhaps not, Bob; but what is he to me? Constance, I know, views him in his proper light, and has known him now too many years to fall in love with him; moreover, her penchant lies in another direction."

"It was not of Constance I was then thinking," replied Bob, "but of another young pet of mine, Blanche Douglas."

"Well, Bob, and what of her?"

"Only that Markham and Vernon, both being hard up for cash, are laying pretty close siege to the heiress already; and she is so young, artless, and warm-hearted, that I am terribly afraid—and it keeps me awake some nights in thinking—that Vernon bids fair to win the prize, if a certain shy, diffident young fellow, called Will Beauchamp, does not come to the rescue."

"Pshaw, Bob! you know I am not a ladies' man, and, like yourself, will never marry any girl for her money. Besides, I should be obliged to plead my cause in a parody on the words of the 'Pirate's Serenade'—

'Forgive my rough mode, unaccustomed to sue,
I woo not, perhaps, *as your soft dandies do ;*
My voice has been tuned to the *cry of the hounds*,
When with shrill notes and screeches the coppice resounds.' "

"Well, Will Beauchamp—and yet I'll warrant that any woman of sense would prefer an honest, plain-sailing, plain-spoken fellow, like yourself, to all the dandies in Christendom."

"No, no, Bob—women like and value all those little attentions and soft whisperings, which Will Beauchamp has neither the time nor the inclination to bestow; for a false tongue, in man or hound, is my abomination, and I will never condescend to flatter man, woman, or child."

"And who ever thought you would, Mr. Will? none of your friends, I'll engage; and least of all Bob Conyers: and that's the reason I want you to tell Blanche Douglas that she must not think of marrying either Markham or Vernon; a hint from you, Beauchamp, will be enough; she will take your advice; for, to my knowledge, your opinions are highly regarded by the heiress."

"There you are mistaken, Bob; women in affairs of that kind will run riot and have their own way; and the more I were to disparage Markham or Vernon, the more should I be favouring their cause, and be looked upon as an impertinent puppy into the bargain, for presuming to dictate to the young lady in the choice of a husband."

"Well, Beauchamp, perhaps you are right; for young ladies, like young fillies, are ticklish animals to handle, and will bolt sometimes in the contrary direction you wish them to go. It will not do, perhaps, for *you* to touch on this subject; but as I have dandled her on my knee when a child, she shall know a bit of *my* mind at all events."

"Only with one *proviso*, Bob—that you never allude to me in any way, direct or indirect, or I will never forgive you."

"Very well, Beauchamp; that you are a confounded sensitive fellow, I know full well; but I know this also, which you don't seem to know yourself, that you think deeply sometimes of Blanche, and there is a peculiar expression about your eyes, and hers also, when talking together, which has struck me more than once."

"Fancy, Bob, fancy! only a rather wide stretch of your discursive imagination; but I am wedded already, and here comes Charley with my family."

"Ay, and as handsome a lot as ever the sun shone on; so now to horse, Will; but I shall meet you to-morrow, at Harcourt's, I hope?"

"Perhaps you may, as Constance goes, and has accepted for two, which means, I believe, herself and me."

While William Beauchamp and Conyers had been discussing these matters, *sotto voce*, in a bay window at the extreme end of the room, other visitors had been thronging in, to pay their respects to the old squire and the ladies; and sherry, with fine sparkling October, was freely circulated amongst the strangers and farmers on the lawn; when, on the appearance of the hounds, all eyes were at once directed towards them.

"Ah, Beauchamp!" exclaimed Sir Francis; "there is a sight worth riding a hundred miles to view; a splendid pack indeed! we can't beat you in Leicestershire at that game. Magnificent animals! but I should think a trifle too big for our fences, where a smaller hound can creep through."

"Well, perhaps it may be as you say," replied Mr. Beauchamp, "although our hounds go at their fences like greyhounds; they are too highly bred for creeping where they can jump; and in our stiff vale country, with high banks and double ditches, and the lands, after heavy rain, half under water, I think small hounds would never do the work ours do—at least, not in their style; and with fox-hounds, style, in my opinion, is everything."

"Right, my old friend, you are quite right; style is the thing with fox-hounds. Harriers may hunt a fox to death, but they can't finish him off in the same style as fox-hounds."

"Well, then there is another reason why I prefer large hounds (not heavy, lumbering, throaty brutes, whose heads are so heavy that, when once down, they can't get them up again), but with clean heads and necks, and straight, muscular limbs, active and lightsome as tigers; they have power and strength to work over our heavy country, and come cheerfully home after the hardest day, with courage unabated, and sterns well up. Besides, every man has not the brains to breed a big, clever hound; and I dislike little men, little women, little horses, and little hounds, although they are all very well in their way, but not to my taste."

"Well, Beauchamp," replied Sir Francis, "you have succeeded to the utmost of your wishes, for I never yet saw so fine and handsome a pack of fox-hounds as that now before me, and if they can go the pace, they are quite perfection."

"That you will see also by-and-by, Burnett, if the scent holds."

"Come, then, let us mount and away, for I see your son is already in the saddle, and anxious to begin."

CHAPTER II.

The breakfast-room was cleared in a trice, and many polite offers made by Fred Beauchamp, Vernon, and Markham, to lift Miss Constance on her beautiful bay, which stood at the hall door, with Bob Conyers carefully examining the girths and bridle.

"Thank you," she said, "for your kind attentions; but my friend Mr. Conyers would be highly offended were I to accept any other hand than his, which was the first to place me on horseback."

"Well, Con," said Bob, as he adjusted her habit, after vaulting her into the saddle, "you look like your father's own child this morning, and I'll back your seat and management on horseback against all the riding-school-taught misses in England."

"Ah, Mr. Conyers," she exclaimed, laughing; "that is a little vanity on your part, because you were my instructor."

"Well, Miss Beauchamp," interposed Vernon, "Conyers may be justly proud of such a highly-finished and graceful pupil."

"Thank you, Mr. Vernon, for your compliment; but fine speeches are thrown away upon a fox-hunter's daughter, which I told you once before this morning;" and lightly touching her horse with the whip, he sprang instantly away, capering and kicking, to the consternation of Markham and those near; but Constance never moved an inch from her seat, and bounded off, with Bob at her side, laughing and patting her horse on the neck, delighted with his gambols.

"By gad, Vernon!" exclaimed the Captain, "that's a deuced fine horsewoman, sits like a jockey; but her horse's heels were devilish near finding out whether I had any brains in my head."

"Not many there, I'll answer for," replied Vernon, "and none to spare;" saying which, he galloped away to overtake

Miss Beauchamp. The whole cavalcade were now on the move. Will Beauchamp with the pack, and his two whippers-in, taking the lead, and close behind them Mr. Beauchamp, Sir Francis Burnett, and old Sir Lionel Markham, who had only just arrived.

"Why, Markham," exclaimed the squire, "we gave you up as not intending to honour us this morning, and Constance said she was sure you must be very ill, not to patronise her breakfast table on our gala day."

"No, Beauchamp; thank goodness I am hearty and well, but had some confounded long-winded business letters to write and post to-day; and thinking it very doubtful where our Parkwood fox might lead us, I sat down and answered them at once; but they spoilt my appetite for breakfast. However, here we are, just in the nick of time to see Will's darlings before they dash into covert. By Jove! Beauchamp, they are beauties, indeed; their coats like satin, and the very acme of condition, ribs well defined, flanks light, and how gingerly too they step along, like dandies in cork-heeled boots, heads here, heads there; by Jove! sir, there'll be a scent to-day."

"So say I, Markham; and when once away, they will bid you and me good bye."

"Never mind, my old friend; knowledge of country is half the battle, and we shall, I hope, be there or thereabouts at the finish. Now then, away they go, slap dash into covert; one wave of Will's hand, and not a hound is to be seen outside. Beautifully done! Yoic over, my lads, that's all—and away goes Charley, sneaking along like his namesake, quickly but silently, to the further end of the covert. Quick, open the gate into the drive, and now see how they dash, and fly over the stuff—heads up, too, by Jove! they wind him—there's a fox on foot, I'll swear. Hark! Bounty has found him."

"Hoic! hoic!" cries Will. In a minute the chorus is complete, every tongue proclaiming the glad tidings that a fox is found.

"By Jove, what a crash! they are close to his brush—and now Will's scream, he is over the drive, mark how they dash, and fling across into the high wood, in their wide-spreading column, carrying everything before them. Go he must, or die."

"Now, Burnett," cried Mr. Beauchamp, "put in the spurs, and away to the opposite gate, at the further end of the drive; we old fellows will follow."

The Leicestershire man was gone in a moment, and had just left the wood, when Mr. Beauchamp suddenly exclaimed, "Stop, Markham, the hounds are at fault, and I hear Charley's holloa and rate, hark back again. Just as I feared—those coffee-housing cigar fellows have headed the fox back into covert. Ay, ay, now they are at him again; he is still holding to the outskirts of the wood, but the horsemen prevent his breaking. Now, Markham, steady a moment, they are turning, and we shall see them cross the drive before us. Look, yonder he goes," as at a couple of bounds the fox cleared the drive; and with a scream which made the welkin ring, the old squire rushed to the spot, and, cap in hand, cheered his darlings on the scent.

"Now, Markham, we must forget our age, and stick to him; this fox means mischief, and will break at the lower end; come on, now is our time, we have them all to ourselves, and there is a capital line of gates up to the furze hills, which is his point." Clapping spurs to their horses, the two old sportsmen bustled along down the nearest drive, which led to the bottom of the covert, and when they reached the gate, the pack was streaming away over the second large grass field, with heads up and sterns down, running as if they could see him.

"By Jove, what a pace, Beauchamp! we shall never catch them."

"Come along," roared the squire, and bang he went over the first bullfinch. "Now for the gates—here we are, it's plain sailing now, and turf all the way. Give Hotspur his head, I say; put him along;" and fast and furious went the old squire, screaming and spurring as if in the hey-day of his youth.

"Hah! hah!" laughed Sir Lionel, "this is glorious fun! the dandies won't sneer at the old fogies to-day, nor the Leicestershire men override the hounds. But here comes Will, I declare, with half a dozen fellows striving for the lead; but it won't do—Rattler holds his own, and has the speed of them all. Bang, bang, over the gates, here he comes. Ah! Will, you've caught us at last, my boy."

"Glad to see you, sir, riding so well to-day; you gave us the slip at starting with the governor; but keep up the ball, Sir Lionel, now you have set it going. You won't be overridden yet awhile."

"Go along, Will, never mind me; Beauchamp and I will fight on as long as we can."

"Well done, my dear dad," cried his son, as he rode by his side for a few seconds; "you handed them cheerily over the drive; now, good-bye, and beware of those helter-skelter fellows behind."

The hounds had now gained the furze hills, where a large patch of thick gorse gave the fox an opportunity of recovering second wind, the nature of the covert preventing his foes pressing him so closely as in the more open copse wood; and here they remained dodging about until the whole field, consisting of a hundred and fifty horsemen, or thereabouts, joined them.

"Well, Burnett," exclaimed Mr. Beauchamp, "was that fast enough for you?"

"Can't say exactly, my friend, as a man is not expected to ride through a hundred acres of underwood as he would over a stubble field; but this patch of gorse is more to my taste, from which they won't give me the slip quite so easily. By gad, this puts one in mind of Leicestershire—fine open pastures all around—hounds cannot run away from us here."

"Don't make too sure of that, Burnett," replied Mr. Beauchamp; "you will find it stiff work across that vale, with ditches deep enough to hold a horse, with only his head above water; but look, Charley's cap is held up, the fox is away, and now comes the tug of war." In a second, Will's scream brought the pack all round him, and settling down to the scent, they flashed away like lightning.

"Now, Master Will," cried Sir Francis, taking his place by his side, "I mean to keep you company, and see if your paragons can run away from me."

"Come on then, Sir Francis, here's something to begin with," as a stiff ox fence, about six feet high, stood across the common, right before them, over which the hounds had just dashed. Sir Francis put on the steam, going at the leap full speed, which prevented his horse measuring his distance, and his stride bringing him too near the fence for a good take off, he swerved suddenly aside, and threw his rider. William Beauchamp, by pulling up a little, enabled his horse to take it in his own style, and clearing it, he rode quickly away on the other side. As Sir Francis fell, two stout, hard-riding young farmers came down together at the fence, which being broken by their weight, made a gap for others to pass easily over; and the baronet never having quitted his hold of the reins, was soon in his saddle again, going fast and furiously, to make up for lost time. Charley remarked to his master, "The Leicestershire baronet won't ride over them to-day, sir, I think."

"Not if we can hold on at this pace," was the reply; "but if we come to a check, he will be in upon us directly."

About a score of the first flight were now with Sir Francis, all striving for the lead; and the baronet, to escape them, sent his horse flying at a stiff double fence, landing him with his heels in the ditch on the other side, the shock again dislodging the rider from his seat.

"Eh! Burnett," exclaimed Captain Markham, who had landed by his side, "that was a nasty one, old boy! Much damaged, old fellow?"

"Pray mind your own business, sir," retorted the baronet, angrily; "I don't want your assistance."

"Oh! ah! peppery old boy!—soon get cooled a little—fine piece of water just below."

"In which I hope you'll be drowned, you conceited fool!" muttered the baronet, as he sprang on his horse's back.

Bob Conyers (having left Constance on the furze hills to return home with her groom) now rode up, and joined Sir Francis. "It won't do, sir," said he, good-humouredly, "going at our banks and double ditches in that fashion, or you will get a fall in every field; just let your horse see how mine takes them on and off the bank, and he will soon catch the trick."

"Thank you, Mr. Conyers; I see no horse can clear these ready-made graves at a fly, and I must now follow your example; but it can't be done in a minute, with this rushing brute, who *will go* in his accustomed style."

"Then take my horse, and I will ride yours," said Bob.

"Oh, no, my good friend, there is no time for changing, so come along;" and another pip was the result, man and horse rolling into the next field.

"You're not hurt, I hope?" said Conyers.

"No," replied Sir Francis; "I'm used to this sort of thing; often ride for a fall to get the other side."

"That's more than I should like to do," remarked Bob; "a fall ain't so pleasant, that I should ride for it."

"Must be done in Leicestershire sometimes, to keep with hounds, sir."

"Oh, very likely," replied Bob; "but in this country it's not the fashion to do things in that way; *we* stick to the pig's skin."

"Hah! hah!" quoth Jack Tyler to his neighbour, Sir Lucius, who was riding with him, and looking back on the prostrate baronet; "we sha'n't be troubled much more with his company. Now for the brook, Gwynne. A sovereign, Markham is in it for one, and Coventry for another; they never can go at water."

Sir Francis here passed them at a furious pace, going at the brook forty miles an hour, and, with a cheer, landed safely over. "Now Captain Markham," he cried, "come along!" and souse went the guardsman into the stream.

"Hah! hah! my boy!" shouted the baronet; "pleasant and cool, I hope, and all that sort of thing! Good bye, Captain, and mind you don't drink too hard."

"Demn that old crack-jawed fallow!" chattered the Captain, with drawn breath, and teeth rattling like castanets; "but I'll be the death of that fire-eater, if ever I get on his track again."

Fred Beauchamp, although laughing ready to split his sides, gave the Captain's horse a lifting hand, and they were soon again on *terra firma*. "Thank'e, Fred," said Markham; "I'll do the same for you another time; but demmit all, I'll ride in the wake of that Leicestershire hero, and knock him over the very first fence we meet together."

"Easier said than done, Markham, for he's going at a trimming pace now."

"Then here goes to catch him." And away they rattled.

It is needless to relate the various casualties that occurred over four miles of stiff enclosures, which the hounds traversed at such a pace that none but their huntsmen and two whippers-in were ever near them, till they reached a large woodland called the Holt, where all hoped for some little respite to their blown horses; but in vain; the gallant fox held on his course, going straight through this line of coverts, reaching nearly three miles in extent, and again bravely faced the open. The heavy, sticky nature of the soil in the drives (being a yellow clay) told fearful tales on the already distressed horses, whose riders still pushed them along, there being no fences to impede their progress.

"Holloa, Bob!" cried Vernon, who was riding behind him, "you've lost a shoe."

"Nothing more likely, Dick; but if I had lost all four, instead of one, there's no time for repairs, for I hear the horn again to the left, and the hounds are away."

"And where now, Conyers?" inquired the Captain; "not across another brook, I hope?"

"Even so, Markham—the forest is his point, some six miles a-head, if Will and Charley don't handle him before he reaches it. Forward, away! come along, you thrusting scoundrels!"

Having cleared the wood, about fifty horsemen showed on the other side, the Leicestershire baronet taking up the running at a determined pace, to retrieve his lost laurels; and the fences being now lighter, he kept the lead, for about three miles, to the top of a rising ground, from whence the forest might be seen in the distance; but the pace to the hill told tales on his gallant horse, which staggered and fell at the last gate, rolling over him. The next four leading men left the baronet as he lay; but Bob Conyers, seeing the accident, went directly to his assistance, and, jumping from his saddle, helped him to rise.

"You are hurt now, Burnett," he said, "or, at least, ought to be."

"I feel queer and giddy," replied Sir Francis, in a choking voice; "but help me on the saddle, I shall be all right again."

"No, you won't just yet, and if I put you up one side, you would tumble over the other; it won't do, Burnett, so just sit down where you are; take a pull at my flask, and let's see if you have any ribs smashed."

"Oh, nothing of that sort, I believe," said Sir Francis, faintly; "but my left shoulder pains me uncommonly."

"And no wonder!" exclaimed Bob, examining his arm; "it's out of the socket. Here, Stubbins," cried Bob, to a young farmer just riding up, "lend a hand; catch hold of Sir Francis, and hold him tight and strong, as you would a bullock by the horns, whilst I put his shoulder to rights;"—when, taking him by the hand, with his knee under the baronet's armpit, Bob pulled with all his might, and snap went the bone into its proper place again; but Sir Francis fainted from the pain.

"Ah, never mind, Stubbins, leave him now, and you go on, my good fellow, with many thanks for your ready help."

Whilst Bob was attending his friend, many were brought to grief in the vale below. Markham, Vernon, and three others came down together to the second brook, at which (company giving courage) they charged nearly abreast; but Markham's horse, being a little in advance, and swerving aside at the brink (having no relish for a second dipping), Vernon and the rest, not being able to pull up, knocked him over, and themselves, too, pell-mell, into the water, where the Captain, from being undermost, was in a fair way of being drowned, had not a sporting yeoman jumped into the brook and dragged him from his horse. As it was, when placed on the bank, the Captain looked more like dead than alive, until relieved of nearly a bucket of fluid.

"Eh! aw! demmit, Vernon!" was his first exclamation. "I feel demned uncomfortable, old fellow."

"That's not unlikely, my boy, after swallowing mud and water enough to choke an alligator. Confound these brooks, with their rotten banks! I'll not ride another inch after that fellow, Will Beauchamp; so get up, Markham, and let us have a glass of hot brandy and water at the nearest public, and then home as hard as we can gallop."

Many others, some from funking the brook, some from seeing no prospect of again catching the hounds, followed Vernon's example, trotting off home; and of the whole field, not half a score went on to the finish.

As Conyers was assisting the baronet on his horse, he exclaimed—"Hark! by Jove they have him! That's Will Beauchamp's whoo-hoop! for a thousand. Ay, there it is again; no doubt about it now; and as I live, the old squire's scream as well! But how the dickens *he* got there puzzles me! Now, Burnett, it's all over; and we will walk our horses quietly down into that lane yonder, to meet them." In about twenty minutes the pack was seen leisurely jogging towards them, with Charley and the fox's head at his saddle.

"Well done, my darlings!" shouted Bob; "but where did you handle him, Charley?"

"Pulled him down, sir," replied the whipper-in, touching his cap; "just two fields this side the forest."

"By gad, Charley, that was cleverly done!"

"Yes, sir, a bit of luck on our side to-day, but he had it twice before on his."

"Why, Beauchamp, my old friend," exclaimed Sir Francis, as the worthy squire approached, "how in the world could you manage to be where you are?"

"Easily enough, Burnett; *you* ride straight; *I* ride cunning, and craft wins this time; but what's the matter? with your arm in a sling? no broken bones, I hope?"

"Shoulder put out, and in again; now it's all right, thanks to your friend Conyers, who gave up his sport to assist me."

"No merit in the case," replied Conyers; "old Plowman was dead beat, and I was glad of an excuse to pull up."

"Don't believe him for once, Beauchamp," said Sir Francis.

"Ay, ay, Bob!" exclaimed the squire; "we know Plowman and yourself quite well enough to swallow no more of that story than we think proper."

"Well, Beauchamp, what now?" inquired Sir Francis; "where's the next draw?"

"Home, so says Will; and there are few to say nay to that. What think you, Coventry?"

"The only thing to be done, in my opinion, Beauchamp. We have had a capital run of at least twelve miles in an hour and twenty minutes, and I am more than satisfied. Enough, sir, is as good as a feast, to any but a glutton; and I like, for the sake of the hounds, to leave well alone."

"And you, Gwynne and Tyler, what are your ideas?"

"*Quantum suff.*," replied Sir Lucius; "and I'll answer for Tyler's being of the same opinion, to say nothing of two lost shoes, for which he must fork out at the next smithy."

"Eh, Gwynne, you don't mean that?"

"Then dismount and see; 'tis true enough."

"We don't ask your opinion, Burnett, and will save you the trouble of expressing it — a warm bath and bed being ordered by your physician."

"Another twenty minutes would suit me quite as well," replied Sir Francis.

"Very likely, and another fracture perhaps," added the squire; "but I don't want my house turned into a hospital for my friends; so home is the word."

With the exception of Tyler and Conyers, the dinner-party that evening at Bampton House might be termed a family one, —the squire never inviting much company on hunting days, it being so uncertain at what hour they might sit down to table. The only ladies were Constance and her friend Miss Raymond, a lively, cheerful person, in age somewhat Constance's senior, who was then on a visit at Bampton. Sir Francis, notwithstanding his hurts and bruises, entered an appearance at the dinner table, and made a tolerable fight with soup and fish, and a savoury dish of minced venison, which the squire had ordered to be prepared expressly for him, seeing he had only one hand comfortably at command; and after the ladies had retired, he was cozily ensconced in a large arm-chair, with a little table at his side, close to the fireplace, and a jug of mulled claret, hot and spicy, for his particular discussion, placed thereon.

"Ah, Beauchamp, my kind old friend, you know how to make your guests feel happy and at home, and now I'm just in the humour to hear how you managed to be in at the finish to-day; it's a mystery to me."

"But easily solved," replied the squire, "as thus:—Having viewed the fox across the drive in Parkwood, I knew his long white tag to be the same we had followed twice last season to the forest, when the owner thereof beat us; and from his trying at first to break at top of the covert, where the cigar men headed him, I knew very well he would make good his point—at least, if able to do so."

"But why did he run to the furze-hills then?"

"To turn up another of his family connections, perhaps, in place of his own precious carcass, or to take second wind by dodging his pursuers in the thick gorse there. But when he broke the second time, in a line for the Holt, thinks I to myself, he now means the forest; and turning into an old lane, I and Markham, having seen you go to the left, bore straight away for the forest, as hard as we could go, and as it so happened, we were not far out in our reckoning. The fox entering the other side of the Holt, threaded the whole length of those coverts, and being down wind, we could hear the hounds turning towards us, still we slackened not our pace until we reached a hard road, which leads straight through the forest. Here we pulled up for a few seconds, when hearing the horn outside the covert, we again rode fast for a couple of miles to rising ground, from which I caught sight of the hounds, running almost mute, with the fox only two fields before them. My old blood boiled up at the sight, and Highflier pricking up his ears, impatient to be with them again, we bundled through the forest fence, and forgetful of our years, stuck to them, as Charley said, 'like good 'uns;' in fact, my horse's mettle was up, and go he would at everything, until we pulled him down in the open. Will, Charley, and myself screaming in chorus, for the last two fields, when they had him in view, as if the fiend possessed us; and whether a six-barred gate or a river had come in our way just then, it would have been of little consequence. There, Burnett, is the history of my adventures to-day; now, what were yours?"

"My tale is soon told, Beauchamp. By being thrown out at the first fence, my chance was over, barring checks; but trying to make up for lost ground, I pumped the wind out of Sky-scraper, who in revenge gave me six falls in the first four miles, and after leaving the Holt, a couple more; in the last of which, to settle the business, he fell and lay upon me. For the rest, I must refer you to that good Samaritan Conyers."

"Who, I am happy to say," chimed in Bob, "arrived just in time to prevent Skyscraper rolling you out for a pancake, on which agreeable occupation he appeared to be most industriously intent, when your humble servant reached the scene of action. Those who have seen a donkey on his back, pertinaciously bent on turning himself over on the highest side of the ground, may form some idea of your comfortable position, with Skyscraper trying to play the same trick, and act as a rolling-pin on your prostrate body."

"Well, well, Burnett," said the squire, "it is well, indeed, you are able to sit in that arm-chair, after such a pounding, and sip your claret so satisfactorily. Such a process would have played old gooseberry with my victualling department."

"Never mind, Sir Francis," said Fred Beauchamp; "you won't be the only man with sore bones to-night, if I may judge by the glimpse I had of our friends in the rear, when looking back from Craig-hill. Horses without riders going in all directions, and such a lot of craners at the brook! Markham, I suspect, had a second cold bath there, but we shall hear all about it to-morrow evening at Harcourt's, who sent me an especial invite; and I am told all the world and his wife are to be there."

"Ah! I suppose to parade the heiress," remarked Mr. Beauchamp.

"She don't want parading, Squire, I'll engage," put in Bob Conyers.

"Oh! I see—I beg pardon, Bob; forgot she is a pet of yours."

"And isn't that enough, my worthy old friend, to convince you she is no forward, affected miss, but one of the right sort, although she is an heiress? *That* can't be helped, yet she will make a thorough good foxhunter's wife, notwithstanding, and a huntsman's too," in a low voice, audible only to his next neighbour, Will Beauchamp.

"I wish your words may prove true, Bob," said Mr. Beauchamp.

"And that you may have an opportunity of judging whether I am a true prophet or not," added Conyers. "Now, Will, pass the bottle, and I'll give you a toast, and as a preface, a stanza from Moore," which he sang in a rich melodious voice—

"Fill the bumpers fair;
Every drop we sprinkle,
From the brow of care,
Smooths away a wrinkle."

"Bravo! Bob," shouted Sir Lucius. "We are warming up a little now—go a-head!"

"Now, gentlemen, are you ready?—bumpers all round?" inquired Bob, without noticing Sir Lucius' remarks.

"Ay, ay," was the general response.

Then said he, rising, "Here's to the health of Blanche Douglas; and may she have a fox-hunter for her husband." Every glass was emptied in a second. "Thank you, my friends; and now, Sir Lucius, I'll give you one more verse from Tommy Moore, with the chorus.

"Wit's electric flame
Ne'er so swiftly passes,
As when through the frame
It shoots from brimming glasses.

("Now the chorus," aside.)

"Fill the bumpers fair,
Every drop, &c."

In which all joined most heartily, not excepting the squire and Sir Francis.

"Couldn't you favour us with another stanza?" said the latter.

"Not to-night, Burnett, although you know '*Dulce est desipere in loco;*' but the other verses are not much to my taste; and besides that, I must reserve my sweet voice for Miss Constance, with whom I have promised to warble a stave or two."

Soon after, coffee was introduced, and an adjournment made to the drawing-room, where music and singing brought the evening to a happy conclusion, with this select and cheerful party of friends; the gentlemen not being sorry to retire rather early to their rooms, after the fatigues of the day. Sir Francis was obliged to take the lead up-stairs about eleven o'clock, escorted by his considerate friend, who insisted on seeing he had everything comfortable.

Whilst the family are locked in the arms of Morpheus, we may take the liberty of an author, who has the privilege of burning the midnight oil, to give a short description of the edifice under whose roof the family of Beauchamp and their guests were now reposing.

Bampton House was a large, long building, with gable ends, situated at the extreme end of a fine avenue of magnificent beech and elm trees of immense proportions; showing the excellence of the soil from which they sprang, not only by their large dimensions, but the altitude of their stems, which can only be attained on superior land. Over the entrance was an old-fashioned portico, reached by a flight of steps on either side, and closed in the front. The hall was lofty and spacious, with an old carved oak staircase, leading up from the centre, and branching off on either side, and a huge fire-place, with old iron dogs, on which large logs of wood were piled, reflecting sufficient heat almost to roast an ox. An antiquated brass chandelier, shining like gold, was suspended from the centre of the ceiling; and from the oak panels were suspended the portraits of many generations past, long since mingled into dust. The heads and antlers of stags and fallow deer (the park containing both species) were tastefully arranged over the fire-place and doors, with old-fashioned guns, cross-bows, and armour disposed in the intervals between the family pictures.

The drawing-room, with its painted glass windows, was upwards of forty feet in length, thirty wide, and lofty in proportion, with a high massive stone chimney-piece, elaborately carved, on which were emblazoned the family arms, with their numerous quarterings.

Old oak cabinets, with curiously carved and worked high-backed chairs of the same material, inlaid tables, and a motley assemblage of other furniture of very ancient date, with a splendid display of old china, helped to fill up the vacant places in this finely-proportioned apartment, giving it an air of comfort and sociability, not often found in rooms of this size. The dining-room was of longer dimensions, though not so wide, and being an older part of the house, not so lofty, but the ceiling was divided into compartments by elaborately-carved oak beams. At the lower end stood a sideboard, extending nearly from wall to wall, of the same old dark wood.

The library was of smaller size, containing a fine collection of books, and the favourite resort of Mr. Beauchamp and his family, when there were no visitors staying at Bampton. The building which comprised the stables, coach-house, &c., was a splendid structure, faced with finely-polished stone, having stalls and loose boxes for thirty horses; and over the centre was erected a large cupola, with a clock, which relieved the structure from the monotony of its rather extreme length.

The kennels were large enough to hold easily a hundred couple of hounds, although the pack seldom amounted to that number, except when the young hounds were brought home in the spring of the year from their walks. The kitchen-garden extended over two acres of ground, laid out in various divisions, with wide walks of grass and gravel; producing fruit and vegetables sufficient to supply several families all the year round, but the old squire liked a profusion of every kind, and all at Bampton was on a large scale.

There was also what may be considered in these days a curiosity—an apiary, or bee-yard, consisting of about a hundred hives, the greater portion of the honey being devoted to the concoction of metheglin or mead, for which delicious compound (the very old wine being equal to Frontignac) Bampton Manor had long been celebrated. It were almost needless to say that the old squire took great pride in having everything of the best, both in and out of the house; and the cellars contained, besides wines of the best vintages, the finest beer and the best pressed cider in the whole county, as well as a large supply of brown stout (resembling porter), made from an old family receipt.

CHAPTER III.

On the following morning, William Beauchamp was the first to enter the sleeping-chamber of Sir Francis Burnett, to inquire how he had passed the night.

"Very indifferently," was the reply; "my arm has pained me greatly, and I feel fevered and restless."

"I am sorry indeed to hear it, Sir Francis, and hope you will follow my advice in keeping to your bed; there is nothing like warmth and rest in such cases; and my father, who is a good doctor, will make you a composing draught, unless you prefer seeing our country Æsculapius."

"No, no, Beauchamp; I don't want the contents of an apothecary's shop poured down my throat; a seidlitz-powder will do quite as well as any of their stuff."

"That you can have directly," said Beauchamp, ringing the bell; "and if you will put yourself under the governor's care for a couple of days, he will soon bring you round again."

"Well, I hope so, Will; but old bones won't stand bruising like young ones; and you know I am old enough to be your father, although still strong and heart-whole."

"You went like a man of five-and-twenty yesterday," observed Beauchamp.

"Yes, yes, when hounds run, I must be with them; but now sit down a moment, and tell me about these Harcourts, where you are going this evening. Your father does not seem to fancy them, I see; and the heiress, who is she?"

"Mr. Harcourt is no fox-hunter," replied Beauchamp, "but of good family—very fond of money—in short, a bit of a Nabob; and, being of different politics, he and my father don't quite suit each other."

"I should be surprised if they did," remarked Sir Francis.

"Mrs. Harcourt is rather a fine lady too—fond of dress, fond of company, very agreeable, and still handsome—younger by ten years than her husband, who owns to fifty."

"Any family?" inquired Sir Francis.

"None whatever."

"Now the heiress, what of her?"

"She is in her seventeenth year, or thereabout, rather tall, but of a well-proportioned figure, of most pleasing and expressive, though not strikingly handsome, features, yet a very lovely girl, affectionate and lively in disposition, not in the least affected or conceited, and, should she live to the age of twenty-one, will inherit all her father's property in Scotland, at least ten thousand a-year, besides what her uncle and guardian, Mr. Harcourt, may choose to leave her. She has also an aunt on her father's side, Mrs. Gordon, living at the priory, whose late husband, dying in India, left her all his property; and she has neither chick nor child."

"Upon my word, Beauchamp," replied Sir Francis, "this Miss Douglas won't want suitors by the dozen. Why, William, that ten thousand per annum would help to keep the pack going."

Beauchamp shook his head, saying, "It won't do, Sir Francis."

"And why not, sir?"

"Because, of the many bad names the world may give me, a fortune-hunter sha'n't be one."

"Pshaw, Beauchamp! all that is trash; what is the world to you?"

"Not much; yet, the insinuation that I had married a girl for her money would not be very agreeable."

"But as a man of sense, knowing it to be false, you ought not to care a rush about it."

"Appearances would be against me, Sir Francis, and they are everything in the eyes of the world; irrespective of which, I am not in love with Blanche Douglas."

"Then take my advice, Beauchamp, and fall in love with her as soon as you conveniently can. So now go to your breakfast, and send me up a cup of coffee."

Preparations were made on a grand scale at Throseby Hall (Mr. Harcourt's seat) for the company expected to grace the dinner-table that evening, about five-and-twenty guests being invited, including Sir Lionel and Lady Markham, with their two eldest daughters, Selina and Caroline, and the Captain; Lord and Lady Mervyn and daughter, from Marston Castle; Colonel and Mrs. Rolleston, of Warley, and two daughters; Mr. and Mrs. Thornhill, of the Down House, with their daughter Isabella; Sir Lucius Gwynne, Bob Conyers, Vernon, Tyler, and Fred Beauchamp, with his two cousins, William and Constance. Mrs. Gordon, of the Priory, was also expected to make one of the party.

At a quarter before seven, the hour of dinner in fashionable circles at that time (the greater part of the company having assembled in the saloon), the door was thrown open, and Mr. William and Miss Beauchamp were announced; and many a jealous glance was directed towards them, to scrutinise the deportment of this fondly-attached brother and sister, who quietly approached the mistress of the house, by whom they were most courteously received, and then, turning to other acquaintances, mixed among the company.

Constance was most warmly greeted by her friend Blanche, accepting a seat by her side on the sofa, from which she had just risen. They were soon joined by the Captain and Vernon, who were both striving for the honour of handing the heiress to the dinner-table.

"Really, Miss Beauchamp," lisped the Captain, "you rode quite bootifully yesterday—suppose you will take the lead soon across country—quite a divinity, Miss Douglas, on horseback—I assure you, 'pon honour—hand and seat quite perfection. When shall I have the honour of charging a gate in such delightful company?"

"I never ride at gates, Captain Markham, and seldom over any fence; but at brooks, I think, we should soon part company, as I am told Captain Markham prefers swimming through to jumping over."

"Eh—aw—why, yaas, I did get a ducking yesterday, and was nearly drowned by Pegasus rolling in upon me—a near thing, Vernon, eh!"

"Not much danger, Markham, with half a dozen fellows all round you, in only four feet water; but next time, my boy, we can make a nearer thing of it, by keeping your head under water a little longer."

"Much obliged, Vernon, but hope I sha'n't need your kind services."

"Perhaps not, although young animals of a certain class are often consigned to the water, to which you seem to have an instinctive partiality."

"Don't take, Vernon; what description of animal?"

"Guess, Markham."

Constance, turning to Blanche, whispered something in her ear, at which both enjoyed a hearty laugh, much to the Captain's annoyance.

"Eh, Miss Constance, you know what Vernon means?"

"How should I, Captain Markham? I can only guess."

"Well, what do you guess, then?"

"I do not feel quite at liberty to say what I think."

"Not far out, I suspect," added Vernon, with a cynical smile at the ladies.

"Demmit, Vernon, then what do you mean, if you know your own meaning; what animals are consigned to the water?"

"Young puppies."

"Eh! 'pon honour can't see the wit of the thing."

"Didn't suppose you would," replied Vernon, as the discomfited life-guardsman walked away in high dudgeon.

When the dinner was announced, Vernon's arm was immediately offered and accepted by the heiress, and, at the same moment, Bob Conyers coming up, claimed Constance. Whilst this conversation had been carried on, William Beauchamp was sitting next to Mrs. Gordon, with whom he was a favourite.

"So I hear," she said, "you were out hunting yesterday, and had a capital run."

"Yes, pretty good," was the reply; "but you know, my dear Mrs. Gordon, fox-hunting is a forbidden topic in the drawing-room, and I generally avoid entering into any conversation of that kind with ladies."

"And why so, Mr. William?"

"Because it cannot be very agreeable to them, I should think."

"Just as agreeable, perhaps, as our talking about worsted work, silks and satins, muslins and flounces, is to you."

"Well, I am rather particular on this point, because, being now the Master of the Foxhounds, ill-natured people will say I am leading to my own praises."

"And what will not ill-natured people say?" replied Mrs. Gordon; "anything and everything but what they ought to say. However, as you forbid the subject, I must talk to you now about my own affairs, and that's selfish enough."

"But always interesting to me," added Beauchamp.

"No flattery, William—that I dislike, especially from you; but now tell me what day you will be disengaged next week, as I wish to consult you about some alterations I purpose making in my grounds and flower-garden."

"Any day most suitable to yourself (barring our hunting days), I will with pleasure ride over to the Priory."

"And stay and dine with me, mind, that's the condition," said Mrs. Gordon.

"And not a very irksome one, either," replied Beauchamp.

"Well, then, will Tuesday suit you?" inquired Mrs. Gordon.

"Exactly," was his reply.

"So let it be then, but don't expect to meet company, as I must have you entirely to myself, to talk over other matters, when we can draw our chairs round the fire, and enjoy a cosy chat."

A movement was now making to the dining-room, when Beauchamp said, "Allow me the honour of offering you my arm."

"No, William, you must do the attentive to some younger lady. Where is Blanche?"

"Already pounced upon by Vernon."

"Ah! I dislike that man; his attentions to my niece are too particular to have escaped my notice; but Blanche, although young and unsuspicious, has too much good sense to be taken with a handsome face and fine speeches only."

"I hope so," said Beauchamp, seriously; "but——" and he paused.

"What, William?"

"Vernon is considered almost irresistible with the fair sex, and our mutual friend, Conyers, declares he dreads his influence over your niece, which is becoming very apparent."

"Does Robert Conyers say so?" inquired Mrs. Gordon, anxiously.

"Yes; indeed he told me so only yesterday morning."

"Then there may be some cause for alarm, and I must have a *tête-à-tête* with him on the subject. Now, William, as the company is pairing off, I will take your arm, and be envied by half, if not all the young ladies of the room, for carrying off their *preux chevalier*." As they were entering the dining-room, Mrs. Gordon whispered, "The other side of the table, William —I must judge for myself;" and they were soon seated nearly opposite Vernon and Miss Douglas.

"This will just do," said Mrs. Gordon; "aunts are proverbially lynx-eyed."

"And nieces self-willed," added Beauchamp, "if subject to much supervision; interference is hazardous, and will often produce the contrary effect to that desired."

"I know it well, William, and you need not doubt my discretion."

In so large a company the conversation became more particular than general, and drowned by the hum of so many voices, Vernon had an opportunity of dropping his soft, honeyed speeches into the ear of Blanche Douglas, unheard by others, the nature of which the mounting colour of her cheek alone betrayed; the pleasure derived from his witty remarks and flattering attentions being too conspicuous in her happy looks and bright sparkling eye, to admit of much doubt as to her enjoyment of his society.

After hazarding something more piquant and expressive of softer emotions than usual, Vernon happened to cast his eyes across the table, and then observed Mrs. Gordon's stern look full upon them.

"Ah!" he remarked, "your aunt appears to take a deep interest in our conversation, with that stupid fellow Beauchamp by her side, who has only language for hounds; but aunts are always troublesome, meddling old ladies, ever interfering and dictating to their unhappy nieces and nephews. I met Harry Scarsdale in town the other day (who is dependent on two tabbies of that genus), driving furiously towards the Regent's Park. 'Where now, Harry?' I inquired, 'in such hot haste?' —'To the Zoological Gardens.' 'What for? a bear or a tiger?' —'Not the latter, there is one of that class up behind; but what I want is, an *ant eater*, to devour those confounded old relatives of mine.' "

Blanche could not suppress a laugh at this anecdote, but almost immediately after said, "My aunt, Mr. Vernon, is not of that class, I am happy to say, but one of the kindest and most indulgent relations I possess."

"Happy to hear it, Miss Douglas; there are exceptions to every rule, and Mrs. Gordon is one to the usual run of aunts, I conclude; but all old people forget 'the merry days when they were young.' By the way, I hope you will favour us with that song in the evening?"

"There are so many superior performers here to-night, that I had rather be excused," she replied.

"None who possess a sweeter voice than yourself," was the courteous rejoinder; which Blanche only noticed by a slight inclination of her head.

Mrs. Gordon had seen enough to make her feel very uncomfortable during the dinner hour, but prudently resolving to keep her own deductions safely locked up in her own bosom, she entered into conversation with her neighbour on general subjects, to prevent any suspicion of her true thoughts being divined.

On the ladies rising to leave the dinner table, she placed her arm within her niece's, and sat down with her in the drawing-room, rather apart from the other ladies, and, notwithstanding her wise resolutions, could not forbear alluding to Vernon. "You appeared greatly pleased with Mr. Vernon's lively sallies and compliments, my dear?"

"He is very entertaining," was the response.

"And very impertinent also," replied Mrs. Gordon. "His remarks about aunts, which I overheard, were particularly facetious."

"Indeed, my dear aunt, I was so annoyed by those remarks, that I scarcely spoke to him afterwards."

"You do quite right, my dear, in taking the part of those who have your true interest at heart, and defending your nearest (and I must say it) dearest relative, whom a flippant, pert coxcomb tried to make appear ridiculous in your eyes. It is unnecessary, I hope, my dearest child, for me to put you on your guard against the advances of such frivolous, false-hearted men as Mr. Vernon and Captain Markham, however entertaining or prepossessing in manners. They are complete men of the world, wicked, witty, and worthless; and eagerly intent on marrying some heiress, to squander her money away on their own selfish gratifications. But, my dear Blanche, you will believe me when I add, that I never wish to interfere unnecessarily with your inclinations, or dictate to you in the choice of a husband, although you are too young yet to think of marrying."

"Indeed, my dear aunt," replied Blanche, "I have really never thought seriously of it, and nothing would ever induce me to accept any person you disapproved of."

"Thank you, my love; and now I want you to come and stay with me a few days next week, to help me in laying out my new flower-beds; but I promise you an exemption from any further allusion to this subject."

"Dearest aunty, I shall be too happy to come; but you must speak to my aunt Harcourt."

"Of course, my love, that I shall do at once, and name Monday." Mrs. Gordon rising, immediately approached Mrs. Harcourt, and her request was most graciously complied with.

We must now return to the dining-room, where we find the gentlemen all riding their favourite hobbies; of the elder portion, some discussing politics, some agricultural, some magisterial topics; others, again, literary and scientific matters: the younger portion dilating on sporting, hunting, shooting, wine, and women. Lord Mervyn, having the worst of a fight with Sir Lionel Markham on the measures of the Government, turned suddenly to William Beauchamp, with a sneer, inquiring, "When are we to have the honour of a visit from you gentlemen in scarlet, Mr. Beauchamp?"

"Any day after next week your lordship may choose to appoint," was the quiet reply.

"And why not next week, Mr. Beauchamp? It would suit me better, as I have a large shooting party the following week."

"Our appointments, my lord, for next week are already sent to the papers, and cannot now be altered without causing dissatisfaction, and perhaps great inconvenience to many."

"To a lot of tinkers and tailors, butchers and farmers, who, the last time your hounds met at my coverts, sir, made the drives resemble a ploughed field."

"The most industrious, my lord, at that work, were your two most staunch supporters at your son's election for the county, Messrs. Barker and Bennet, the great brewers of Marston, whom I must leave to your lordship to lecture on the subject, as all my remonstrances were totally unheeded."

"Well, sir," replied Lord Mervyn, "it is a great nuisance to have my drives cut to pieces, and my hares and pheasants driven all over the country by your confounded dogs."

"The remedy, my lord," replied Beauchamp, "lies in your own hands; you can forbid the hounds drawing your coverts at all, which is a mere form I would readily dispense with, as we seldom find a fox there."

"That is no concern of mine, Mr. Beauchamp; if foxes don't fancy my woods, I can't help their taste; they are free to come and go when they like, I suppose?"

"I wish this were the case, my lord; but your keeper's motto is, *Vestigia nulla retrorsum.*"

"He tells me, sir," replied Lord Mervyn, "that he never destroys a fox, and I believe him."

"Then who does, my lord? since two dead foxes were found buried in the field close to your home wood, last week."

"By whom, sir? I wish to know who dared to be prowling about my chief preserve?" inquired Lord Mervyn, becoming very excited.

"The person who found them," replied Beauchamp, very coolly, "was my whipper-in, who was sent in search of a stray hound, and called at your keeper's house, to inquire if he had seen him, and in riding across the field, his horse stumbling over some loose earth, the man dismounted, and then he found a brace of dead foxes, recently killed, with their legs broken in traps."

"Put them there himself, I dare say," rejoined Lord Mervyn, "to accuse my men of killing them."

"That, my lord," interposed Bob Conyers, "I'll answer for, he never did."

"And pray, who asked your opinion, Mr. Conyers?" inquired Lord Mervyn.

"I choose to express it, sir, in defence of an honest servant, who is unjustly accused," retorted Bob.

"Then, sir," replied Lord Mervyn, in a furious passion, "I neither wish for your company, Mr. Beauchamp's, his hounds, or his whippers-in at any of my coverts again."

"Glad to hear it, my lord; an open foe is preferable to a pretended friend; and now you have taken up the cudgels against half the county, we shall soon see who will be the first to cry, 'Hold, enough.'"

"I care neither for you, nor any of your ragamuffin followers," replied Lord Mervyn, his passion carrying him beyond all bounds.

"In which number, I suppose, I must consider myself included," exclaimed Sir Lucius Gwynne, his Welsh blood beginning to boil up.

"As you please, sir," was the rejoinder.

"Then, my Lord Mervyn," said Sir Lucius, rising from his chair, and seizing a decanter, "retract that expression, or I'll throw this bottle at your head."

"You will?"

"Yes, sir, I will. You, you upstart spawn of a lawyer's clerk, smuggled into the House of Peers for doing the Government's dirty work, *you* call me a ragamuffin; by Jove! sir, I'll scatter your foul brains about your shoulders, if you don't beg my pardon this instant."

Tyler, who was a friend of Lord Mervyn's, whispered in his ear, "It must be done, Mervyn; pray apologise, or you must meet him, and he is a dead shot."

The crest-fallen lord muttered some explanation.

"That won't do, sir," exclaimed Gwynne; "speak out, that all may hear."

"I did not intend to apply the term I used to you, Sir Lucius."

"Very well, my lord; that saves you from a broken head, or a bullet through your body this time," resuming his seat.

"'Pon honour, Mervyn," said the Captain, "sorry to trouble you, but his Majesty's commission, Life Guards, and that sort of thing—eh? you understand, my lord? ragamuffins won't do—our fellows won't stomach that title, Mervyn."

"It was not intended for you, or them, Captain Markham," replied Lord Mervyn.

"Glad to hear it, my lord."

"Well," interposed Vernon, "if it affords any real gratification to Lord Mervyn to know there is one ragamuffin in this room who owns to the title, I confess myself amenable to that soft impeachment; and as I have the honour of belonging to his lordship's political party, he will do me the favour, I hope, of allowing this motto to be engraved on his banner, at his son's next election, 'Mervyn and his ragamuffins for ever!"

"Hah, hah! Vernon! demmed good! Egad, old fellow, your wit cuts a deuced deal sharper than a small sword."

"And now," said Vernon, "as my Lord Mervyn has been favoured with divers opinions, pray may I ask what our worthy Master of the Hounds has to say on the subject?"

"Nothing, sir," replied Beauchamp; "too much has been *said* already for a social party like this; but as holding the high position to which you have alluded, and in which I have been placed with the consent and approbation of the principal landed proprietors of this county, Lord Mervyn must be aware that something more than a verbal apology will be required for the epithet he has been rash enough to apply to the members of our hunt, whom I have the honour of so imperfectly representing."

A dead silence pervaded the room, as Beauchamp delivered this speech, without a muscle of his face moving from excitement or anger; and at its conclusion Sir Lionel Markham observed, "You have well spoken, Beauchamp, and acted as your friends always thought you would, with forbearance and discretion; and you will find those friends ever ready to support you."

"And in that number," said Tyler, "I beg to be included; for Beauchamp is justly entitled to the gratitude of every true sportsman in this county, for his indefatigable exertions and gentlemanly conduct in the field. No one can regret more than I do the unpleasant interruption to our conviviality this evening, for which Mr. Beauchamp is in no way responsible; and I trust Lord Mervyn, now that the heat of the moment is over, will frankly acknowledge, what I am sure he now feels, regret at having used expressions so totally inapplicable to any gentleman in this room, or any member of that hunt to which I have the honour to belong."

"Mr. Tyler," said Lord Mervyn, rising, "you have only anticipated me in the expression of sentiments which are strictly my own; and I do most truly regret having in the heat of passion so entirely forgotten myself. My most humble apologies are justly due to every gentleman here present, and particularly to our kind host, for the scene of confusion I have been the cause of introducing at his hospitable board; and the hasty and unwarrantable expression which so inadvertently escaped my lips will, I hope, be forgiven and forgotten."

Satisfaction being expressed by all at this happy termination of such serious differences, Lord Mervyn, turning to Beauchamp, requested he would name any day, the week after next, to meet at Marston Castle, as he would put off his shooting party.

"By no means, my lord," replied Beauchamp; "disappointment to your friends may be as great as to ours; any day, therefore, in the first week of December will suit us equally well."

"Then we will say the second of that month."

"I thank you, my lord," said Beauchamp, entering it in his pocket-book.

"And now, Mr. Beauchamp, if you and all the members of your hunt will do me the honour of breakfasting with me that morning, I shall feel that I have obtained forgiveness for the past, and I trust to merit your good opinion for the future."

"I shall have much pleasure in accepting your lordship's invitation, which shall be communicated to all the members of our hunt," replied Beauchamp, with a low bow.

"Egad, Mervyn," remarked the Captain, "you are a demmed cantankerous fellow, sometimes, but not a bad one at heart; and I'll do myself the honour of tasting your cherry-brandy, or a glass of Maraschino, on that said second of December."

"I shall be delighted to find you approve it, Captain Markham."

These matters having been adjusted, an attempt was made at cordiality, but failed, as every man in the room knew Lord Mervyn too well to doubt his real feeling towards fox-hunters, and an adjournment to the ladies soon followed.

CHAPTER IV.

On returning to the drawing-room, Captain Markham immediately sought Miss Douglas, who was sitting with her Aunt Gordon and Constance. "Thought we had forgotten you, Mrs. Gordon, I suppose—very late, I know; but all owing to that spiteful old Mervyn—called us ragamuffins, and that sort of thing—Gwynne wouldn't stand it—Welsh blood up—threatened to knock his brains out with the bottle. 'Pon honour, such a scene, very disagreeable indeed—Will Beauchamp pulled him up—thought he would have to fight to-morrow morning—eh—ah—Miss Douglas—demmit all—beg pardon, but you look like a ghost."

Mrs. Gordon's eyes were instantly turned to her niece, who was deadly pale, and appeared near fainting.

"My dearest Blanche, what is the matter? Here, my love, smell at these salts."

"A sudden faintness came over me, dear aunt, but I shall soon be better."

Conyers now came up with "Well, ladies, all's well that ends well; and, now that we are all friends again, I may just tell you what detained us so long in the dining-room"—which he did as shortly as possible, speaking in high terms of Beauchamp's cool and gentlemanly conduct.

"Then there is to be no duel to-morrow?" inquired Mrs. Gordon, anxiously.

"None, my dear madam, I assure you; everything is amicably settled; and, instead of fighting, Will has accepted an invitation to breakfast with Lord Mervyn on this day month."

"Are you not deceiving me, Mr. Conyers?"

"No, on my honour, Mrs. Gordon; and to satisfy you still further, I will send Beauchamp here directly, to show you the entry in his pocket-book."

As Beauchamp approached them, the colour suddenly returned to Miss Douglas's face, suffusing her cheeks and brow, which, not unnoticed by Mrs. Gordon, revealed to her a secret unknown to Blanche herself until that moment, that she loved William Beauchamp. She had long looked upon him as a dear friend, but had hitherto remained totally unconscious of any deeper feeling towards him, when the sudden revelation made by Captain Markham of his life, perhaps, being at stake, sent a thrilling, suffocating sensation circling round her heart, to which she had hitherto been a stranger. Her ill-concealed trepidation at his approach delightfully confirmed Mrs. Gordon in her long-indulged hopes that William Beauchamp might become the object of her niece's choice.

"William," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, as he stood before her, "I have sent for you to hear an account from your own lips of this unpleasant *fracas* with Lord Mervyn, whom, I am told, it was your intention to challenge to-morrow morning."

For a moment Blanche's face was raised to his to scan his looks. Their eyes met, and by that quick, hurried glance, Beauchamp seemed entranced, riveted to the spot; for a moment the full spell of fascination was upon him, as he gazed in silent surprise on the varying colour and trembling form of Blanche Douglas.

"William!" suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, in a sharp tone, "what ails you to-night?—are you tipsy or crazy?"

"Neither tipsy nor crazy, dear Mrs. Gordon; but a fit of abstraction seized me; my thoughts were wandering; pray forgive me."

"A pretty confession, Mr. William, in the presence of three ladies," added Constance; "so now, to make your peace with Aunt Gordon, just have the goodness to occupy my seat till I return, and make a full confession of your wicked conduct, whilst I hear Mr. Conyers' version of the story; we shall then know who speaks most truth; so sit down between those two ladies, who, I hope, will both in turn give you a thorough good lecture."

Beauchamp required no second invitation, and turning first to Miss Douglas, who was on his right side, said in a low tone, scarcely above a whisper, "Dear Blanche, you look pale and agitated; what has distressed you?"

"Oh, nothing now!" she replied. "I felt faint a little while ago, but dear aunty's vinaigrette"—again applying it to her nostrils—"has nearly revived me."

"Now, William," interposed Mrs. Gordon, "I am all impatience; pray begin, and tell me the whole truth."

"And so I will, dear madam," replied Beauchamp; "every word of it."

"Don't dear madam me, sir; your sister, Constance, like a good, dear, obedient child, does as she is bid, and calls me Aunt Gordon; and I desire you will do the same, unless you wish me to call you Mr. Beauchamp."

"Then, dear Aunt Gordon, I will give you chapter and verse of the whole conversation in the dining-room, after the ladies left, without further delay."

"Only what concerns yourself, William, and has reference to your quarrel with Lord Mervyn. I don't want to hear all the nonsense that is usually talked by gentlemen over their wine."

Beauchamp, as succinctly as possible, related what passed relative to his altercation with Lord Mervyn, and producing his pocket-book, in which the entry of his appointment to draw the Marston coverts was written, Mrs. Gordon expressed herself satisfied with his explanation.

"Thus far," she said, "all is well; but I wish you clearly to understand, William Beauchamp, that I thoroughly disapprove of duelling. It is a cowardly, unchristian practice, adapted to heathens and atheists only, and, as such, I must exact from you a promise that you will never again permit yourself to stand in the position you have this evening, of meditating the sacrifice of a fellow-creature's life, to satisfy what you gentlemen call by the false name of honour."

"I hope you will acquit me of any such bloodthirsty intention," replied Beauchamp. "The greatest provocation would never induce me to take any man's life, unless in the unavoidable defence of my own."

"That's equivocal, William——"

"Then, is this plain enough? I will never deliberately fire at any opponent with the aim of shooting him."

"Oh! then, I suppose, you are to stand as his target, to be murdered in cold blood; but you are deceiving yourself, not me, William, in this fine-drawn distinction. No person has a right rashly to throw his life away, since it is God's loan, and He only has the right to dispose of it. Remember His commands on this point—'At the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man.' Again, 'Let not the sun go down upon your wrath;' and there are hundreds of the same injunctions throughout the New Testament."

"I will consider well your objections, dear Aunt Gordon, although I believe you are quite right."

"Then why hesitate to follow the promptings of your own conscience?"

"There is a listener," he whispered, "who would not be slow to avail himself of my confessions."

"Ah! I see—we will change the subject."

Vernon had slowly and stealthily approached the back of the sofa where Blanche was sitting, in the hope of overhearing the nature of her conversation with Beauchamp.

"Aside the devil turned
For envy, yet with jealous leer malign
Ey'd them askance."

Leaning on the back of the sofa, Vernon now requested the honour of Miss Douglas favouring him with the song she had promised at dinner.

"I made no such promise, Mr. Vernon," was her reply, and he was again urging his suit, with flattering persuasions, when Mrs. Gordon, seeing Blanche annoyed with his importunities, interfered, saying her niece was very far from well, and she had laid an interdiction upon her singing that evening.

"I could scarcely expect," he retorted, with a sneer, "to detach Miss Douglas from such delightful society."

"Except by the aid of an *Ant-eater*," replied Mrs. Gordon; on which Vernon turned abruptly away.

Soon after he was engaged in an animated conversation with

Captain Markham, the nature of which will transpire in the following colloquy.

"What makes you look so demmed pleasant to-night—claret sour, or what—with that vinegar countenance?"

"That old aunt's enough to put any man out of temper," replied Vernon; "and that fellow, Beauchamp, thinking they are going to have it all their own way with the heiress."

"Eh! 'pon honour—what d'ye mean?"

"I have been watching Beauchamp very intently since he joined her on the sofa, and her looks, when he ventured on some soft speech, betrayed the nature of it; in fact, I believe he is making up to her."

"Well, why shouldn't he? She is fair game to any man to try for without poaching on your ground. Demmit, Vernon, you seem to think no fellow has a right to speak to her but yourself. Eh, 'pon my soul, that's a good joke!—and, if that's your humour, just give me leave to observe, my fine fellow, that Ned Markham considers he has quite as good a chance for the heiress as Dick Vernon."

"Oh! certainly, a much better one," replied Vernon, with a sneer. "Heir to a baronetcy—life guardsman—fine figure—lots of small talk, and all that sort of thing; but I hate Will Beauchamp, and intend to pick a quarrel with him, to get him out of my way. Will you be my second?"

"No, Richard Vernon, I will not; that's plain enough, I suppose." With which the Captain walked away.

A voice from behind whispered in his ear, "Don't despair, Dick; I will supply Edward's place;" and turning round, he confronted Miss Markham.

"You my second, Selina?"

"And why not? Put on Ned's dress, pair of false moustaches, and all that sort of thing—just do, 'pon honour—masculine enough, eh?"

"Decidedly the latter," remarked Vernon, with a sneer; "but I fear you would load my pistol with powder only."

"Oh, no, Dick!—but in place of ball I should load with *dice.* No fear then of missing your victim. You are a deadly hand with them, Richard Vernon."

"Your remarks are so eccentric and ambiguous sometimes," replied Vernon, "that it would puzzle a philosopher to interpret them."

"Indeed, Mr. Richard Vernon, your usual sharp wit is at fault, eh? Then I will leave you to guess my meaning, with this little piece of advice: don't assume the part of assassin and bully by plotting against the life of an innocent man, who is your superior in every point but one—villany!"

"Oh, indeed, Miss Markham, you are in a particularly facetious humour this evening; but suppose I were to insinuate that a certain very gifted and highly accomplished young lady thought more deeply than people imagine of a certain person, whose great recommendation lies in chasing those poor devils of foxes to death, and whose proficiency in dog language, to the exclusion of every other, is notorious."

"You may insinuate what you please, Mr. Vernon; but *facts* are stubborn things, and two or three little transactions of yours have come to my knowledge, which shall be certainly disclosed when Mr. Vernon dares to apply any insulting terms either to William Beauchamp or your humble servant;" with which, making him a low curtsey, she haughtily turned on her heel.

"Ah, I see," muttered Vernon to himself, "that d——d fool, her brother, has been letting the cat out of the bag, so now I must try another game;" with which purpose he crossed the room and joined Mrs. Harcourt, whose glances towards the sofa, where Mrs. Gordon, Blanche, and Beauchamp were sitting, revealed the nature of her thoughts.

"Well, Mrs. Harcourt," he inquired, noticing her dissatisfied looks, "have I misrepresented matters in that quarter?"

"A little exaggerated, I should hope, though not perhaps intentional; but Mrs. Gordon is well aware of our views with regard to her niece." The latter part of her speech was delivered as a check to Mr. Vernon's future attentions to Blanche, which Mrs. Harcourt had observed more than once before, and particularly at dinner that evening—so that the crafty plotter received a rebuke where he least expected one.

Whilst we have been relating these conversations, the company had been enlivened by music and singing, the principal performers being Miss Caroline Markham; Constance, and two Misses Rolleston, with Captain Markham and Robert Conyers; and the evening thus passed pleasantly away, without further incidents, until the carriages were announced.

During their drive home, Constance rallied her brother on his abstraction, saying, "We have gone at least three miles, William, and three words have not passed your lips; what are you thinking of, my sapient brother?"

"Of nothing particular, Con, dear."

"Yes, William, you are (excuse my rudeness in contradicting you); and I will tell you the subject of your meditations, if you promise to confess whether I have guessed rightly or not."

"Well, dear Con, what is it then?"

"Blanche Douglas."

Beauchamp was silent for a moment, then added—

"Yes, Constance, your guess is right; but there is nothing very particular in my thinking about Blanche, of whom I so often think, and her future prospects in life; you know the interest I have long taken in her, and my brotherly affection; she is to me a second sister."

"Yes, dear William, but in that relation she cannot much longer stand to *you*, although I hope she may to *me*."

"That, I fear, can never be, dear Constance."

"And why not, my own true kind-hearted brother?"

"The rich heiress, when once launched on the world, and surrounded by the titled, the rich, and the gay, trying for her hand, will soon forget the humble companion of her earlier and happier years."

"Never, William, believe me, if I know her as I ought to do; although so young, she thinks deeply, judges carefully, and loves, where she does love, intensely: and of this I am quite convinced, that an impression upon her heart, once made, will never be obliterated."

"Well, my dear, enthusiastic sister, time is said to prove the constancy of faithful love."

"William," she said, "will you answer me one question, sincerely and confidentially—for you know me too well to believe that I ever would betray your confidence—do you love Blanche as a sister only?"

"Until this night, dear Con, I believed I did regard her in that light only; but now, my feelings have undergone a change—would that they never had!"

"Why say this, my own darling brother, and in so sad a tone?"

"Because from this hour they must be suppressed, if not extinguished. What! Will Beauchamp a fortune-hunter! never," he replied with emphasis; "perish the thought!"

"And perish thus," added Constance, "the happy dreams, the brightening hopes of that dear confiding girl, who thinks she has found a responding pulse to her own feelings in the breast of William Beauchamp."

"Constance," exclaimed her brother in surprise, "what does all this mean?"

"Simply this, William; I know the language of the eyes, the looks of love; and if the latter were not exhibited to me this night by Blanche Douglas, when Markham spoke of your quarrel with Lord Mervyn, I know nothing of womankind."

"Oh, say not so, Constance."

"It is said and done," she replied; "the die is cast: the happiness or misery of her you love now rests in your keeping to whom she has intrusted, though not yet revealed, her life's dearest treasure. Now, William, we are just at home; and remember, the conversation we have had this evening must never escape your lips, even to our nearest and dearest friends."

"Of that there is little fear; honour and delicacy will keep my lips hermetically sealed on this subject; but beware, my dear Constance, *you* do not compromise your brother."

"As soon, dear William, should I compromise myself."

Mr. Beauchamp and Sir Francis had retired to rest before the return of William and his sister, but Miss Raymond awaited in the drawing-room, in the expectation of receiving a true and particular account of that evening's proceedings.

The appointment for the next morning having been advertised for Barton Court, the seat of Sir Lionel Markham, the worthy baronet threw open his doors to all comers, a substantial breakfast being laid out for their discussion; after which, punctual to the time, half-past ten, Charley made his appearance with the pack, which soon after trotted off to the home wood, where an abundance of foxes was provided for their entertainment. The multiplicity of these animals, however, proved a bar to much sport, from their continual interference with each other's business; but after an hour's rattling work in covert, one of these gentlemen of the brush thought to sneak quietly away from the din ringing in his ears; and, taking advantage of a hedge-row to screen him from observation, faced the open. Charley's quick eye detected his foe slinking along, until, jumping the fence two fields off, he gave one hasty look behind him, and then disappeared. "Ah, old fellow, you think you've done the trick cleverly? just the ticket, namesake," he was muttering to himself, when an old master of harriers came up.

"Well, Charley, just in *my* way this—round and round."

"Yes, sir, we have had enough of that fun, and now you shall have something in *ours;* when, putting his fingers to his ear, he sent forth a scream, which nearly unhorsed the thistle whipper.

"Gone away!" screamed Charley again.

"Where? where?" exclaimed Newman Butler, "I don't see him."

"But I did, sir, and hope never to see him again until he is brought to hand; now for the cobbler's wax, sir," as the hounds came tearing out of covert, and settled down to the scent. "Give Foreman his head, sir, and come along; we've got them all to ourselves." Saying which he cleared the first fence, with a yawning ditch on the other side."

"All right, sir; come along!" cried Charley, as looking back he saw Foreman blundering on his nose, with his master clinging round his neck. "Pick him up, sir, and put more powder in next time."

For five-and-twenty minutes Charley had it all his own way; and so great was the pace, that the hounds ran into their fox before he could reach the next covert. Sir Francis, with his arm in a sling, rode furiously throughout this quick burst, and was one of the first up with Will Beauchamp, Sir Lucius, and Tyler.

"Pretty thing, indeed!" exclaimed the baronet. "Well done, Charley."

"Not much for me to do, Sir Francis," replied Charles, touching his cap, "except going as straight and fast as I ever rode in my life."

"Just treat us to another of the same sort; and here, Charley"—putting a sovereign into his hand—"I'll double it if you do."

Will Beauchamp waited until Sir Lionel and his father came up, when the fox was thrown to the hounds, and a discussion took place as to the next draw. "There is a bit of nice lying in the gorse on Brendon Down, sir," suggested Charley to his master; "just suit the ladies and Sir Francis."

"And so it will, Charley."

"Well, William," inquired Sir Lionel, "where now?"

"Brendon Gorse holds a fox, I think, sir; a gallop over the open will suit the ladies better than tearing through these blackthorn fences."

"Bravo!" exclaimed Selina Markham; "who says you are not a ladies' man, Will Beauchamp? I am tattered and torn, but not forlorn, from riding a race with Dick Vernon, and beating him, too, at the expense of half my skirt."

"Really, Selina," exclaimed her father, "you had better adopt skins and jack-boots at once."

"I have done it already, daddy dear!" she replied, laughing, and patting her boot with her riding-whip.

"Oh, you hoiden!" laughed Sir Lionel, "what next?"

"Don't exactly know, papa, after riding over Dick Vernon, his horse, and a five-barred gate at one swoop."

"The devil she did!" remarked Sir Francis; "that beats Leicestershire hollow."

"And a demmed scurvy trick to play a fallow who was politely stooping to open the gate for you," put in the Captain.

"Think so, Ned? 'pon honour, eh! Now for a scamper on the open; come on, Will Beauchamp, while my blood is up!" saying which, she cantered off towards the downs.

Before throwing the hounds into the gorse, at Will Beauchamp's request, the horsemen ranged themselves in line, to prevent the fox breaking towards the valley, an extent of open downs stretching for several miles in the opposite direction. A brace of foxes were on foot directly, one breaking through the horsemen, with the body of the pack upon his scent, and just emerging from the gorse, where a rate from Charley stopped them in a moment, and they were immediately capped by William Beauchamp on to the line of the other, which had gone straight away at the right point.

"Hold hard one minute, gentlemen!" shouted Beauchamp; "let them get their heads well down first, then ride as hard as you please." But none heeded him, every man going off at score, and leaving the hounds to get together as they could, threading their way with inconceivable dexterity through nearly two hundred horses, without a hound being disabled. The pack got together like a flash of lightning, and took up the running at such a terrific pace, that in a few minutes they were clear away from all interference, the hardest riders being unable to live with them. In five minutes more, in ascending some rising ground, the hounds fairly beat every horse, and in another five minutes they run into their fox on the open down, not an individual being within a mile of them at the finish.

Sir Francis and Will Beauchamp rode side by side through the burst. "Well, Sir Francis," remarked the latter, "they are putting their best legs foremost now, and beating us hollow."

"Gad, Beauchamp! they are flying instead of running. I never could have believed it possible those big, bony hounds could slip away in that fashion."

"Power and speed together, Sir Francis," replied Beauchamp; "that has been our object in breeding hounds."

"And that you have succeeded to the utmost, no man can doubt who rides after them to-day," rejoined his companion.

The delight of Mr. Beauchamp, senior, when arriving on the scene, may be more easily imagined than described. Pulling off his hat, and wiping the perspiration trickling from his head down to his neckcloth, "Well, Burnett," he asked, puffing and blowing from exertion, "does this suit you?"

"Yes, my old friend, although a trifle too fast."

"Glad to hear you are pleased at last—said they couldn't run away from you—what d'ye think now, Burnett?"

"Beaten, sir, beaten, I confess. By Jove! sir, this is Newmarket work."

"Ay, Burnett, and I'll back five or ten couple of those hounds against any Newmarket horse of the present day, over six miles of turf."

"And I believe," added Sir Francis, "you would win the wager."

Selina and Constance, in company with Bob Conyers, now reached the spot, the last ceremonies being delayed until their arrival, when Beauchamp presented the brush to Miss Markham, saying the fox had been selected for the ladies' especial amusement, and hoped they had enjoyed their gallop.

"You entered beautifully for the petticoats, William Beauchamp, and we never enjoyed such a gallop before; have we, Constance?"

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed; "Selina and myself raced the whole distance, leaving dozens behind."

"'Pon honour, I am afraid, got a bad noser in trying to beat us," laughed his sister. "Narcissus put his foot in a rut, and, oh, demmit, what a roll he gave his master, the lifeguardsman, going down the hill—thought he'd never have done turning over. 'Hurt?' I cried out as we passed him. 'Eh!—aw!—'pon my soul, can't tell yet.' 'Then, when you've found out, let me know'—but here he comes to answer the question."

Roars of laughter followed Miss Markham's description of her brother's spill, which had not subsided when he arrived. "Well, Ned," inquired his sister, "have you found out yet whether you are hurt or not?"

"Demned stiff somewhere," replied the Captain.

"'Pon honour, where?" cried Selina, choking with laughter at his grotesque appearance, with his coat split entirely up his back, and his hat crushed to pieces. "A fox had a wound, but he couldn't tell where—is that your case, Neddy, dear?" she inquired, in a pitying tone.

Roars of merriment again burst forth.

"Eh!—aw!—demmit! what are all you fellows laughing at? Can't see the joke."

"Demned surprised if you could," added his sister.

"Really, Selina," exclaimed Sir Lionel, "you are too bad, and if you don't behave better in the hunting-field, I shall not allow you to meet the hounds again."

"Don't be ill-tempered, daddy, dear," she said, coaxingly, riding up and putting her hand on his shoulder. "I enjoy a bit of fun, or a good run, as well as you do, my dear dad."

"You are too witty by half, my dear," replied Sir Lionel.

"Then I'll give the spare half to Edward, papa—will that do?"

"Incorrigible!" exclaimed her father, in despair. "Will you lecture her a little, Sir Francis?"

"Rather be excused, Sir Lionel, as I have an idea she would give me a thorough good lathering in return. But now, what's the next move?"

"Home, I should think; but what says Will Beauchamp?"

"We think of travelling in that direction," replied the master huntsman, "seeing we are now eighteen miles from the kennels."

"Of course you do," added Bob Conyers; "I'd never risk the spoiling such a day's sport as this by drawing again. There are some fellows who hunt by the day, and don't know what to do with themselves until the day is over; which puts me in mind of an answer given by Lord Mervyn to a gentleman who asked him for a day's shooting. 'Not an hour's, sir,' was the reply, and a fair rebuke; for a good shot in half an hour would bag more game in my lord's preserves than he could within a week in common shooting. Sport cannot be measured by time; that's my idea of it."

"And a very correct one, Bob," replied Sir Francis. "I have enjoyed these fifteen minutes over the turf at this splitting pace, more—ten times more—than I should the longest woodland run."

"Come along then, Burnett," exclaimed Mr. Beauchamp, and their horses' heads were turned homewards. As the squire moved off, Sir Lionel shouted, "Mind you dine with us to-morrow, Beauchamp, with Will and Constance."

"Not likely to forget that, Markham," was the response.

On their ride home they met Newman Butler galloping towards them, puffing and blowing like a grampus.

"Eh! well! Will Beauchamp, what have you done with him?" inquired the master of the harriers.

"Carrying him home, Newman," pointing to the hounds with his whip.

"Ah, indeed! too fast for old Foreman—couldn't hold the pace; obliged to give in."

"You are not singular, Newman," replied Will Beauchamp; "scores of others were told off as well as yourself, and are riding at this moment dispersed over the downs."

CHAPTER V.

THE dinner party at Barton Court the next evening consisted of nearly the same individuals we have before described as dining at Mr. Harcourt's, with the exception of Lord Mervyn's family, who sent excuses, in whose places we must substitute Newman Butler, and Mr. Compton, of Brockley Park (the other member for that division of the county, also a great game preserver), with Mrs. Compton, a remarkably fine, handsome woman of about five-and-thirty, who had presented him with a goodly array of young olive branches around his table, the eldest of whom, a boy of fourteen, was then at Eton.

Under the presidency of Sir Lionel, at his own festive board, backed by the old squire of Bampton, formality was obliged to throw off her cold, freezing aspect, and even Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt thawed under the genial influence induced by the warm-hearted and jovial hospitality of the old baronet, now in his seventieth year, whose still tall, stately form, measuring over six feet in height, and fine open countenance, beaming with hilarity and good humour, presented the *beau ideal* of a true English gentleman, "one of the olden time." The squire of Bampton, although not so tall as his friend and contemporary, was cast nearly in the same mould, and very closely resembled Sir Lionel in disposition also.

Notwithstanding the tendency in this all-assuming age to detract from the manners and merits of the old school of *squirearchy*, it would be well did the rising generation resemble more in essential points that which has passed away. What are the forward, flippant manners of the young men of the present day, and especially their pert behaviour to ladies, in comparison with the refined, respectful, and courtly demeanour of their fathers? The antics and airs of apes, or of a linen-draper's assistant, without even his politeness, instead of the conduct and bearing of gentlemen; and their language and conversation with ladies, what are they but a positive insult to any woman of chaste ideas? Compare also a dinner party in the present age with one of the olden time. Now, all is ostentation and display, with their French cooks, French dishes, Swiss valets, and gentlemanlike butlers. No man thinks of committing such a solecism now as asking his neighbour to take wine—formerly a medium of introduction to those unknown to each other; but at a large party in these days, it is one servant's occupation to go the round of the table, pouring champagne and other wines into the company's glasses. There is a total absence of that genuine hospitality, the characteristic of the olden time. No sirloin of beef smokes on the board; but, in place of the old substantial dishes, pâtés, cotelets, fricassées à la mode française, are handed round; foreign fashions predominate even in our very language, which is now deemed so poor and inexpressive as to require French phrases to explain its meaning.

Turn we now in retrospective view to the festive board in bygone days, with the old portly butler, who has grown grey-headed in the service, and the Johnny Raws of the village converted into respectful and attentive serving men, whose interests and happiness appeared to be identified with the members of their master's house.

Lady Markham, having marshalled her guests and assigned partners to each, as she deemed most appropriate, reserving Sir Francis to herself, left the junior part to their own arrangements, with the exception of Miss Douglas, whom she consigned to her son, the Captain, much to the annoyance of Vernon, who was just offering his arm, Will Beauchamp feeling himself imperatively called upon to hand in Selina Markham, out of respect to her father, and the others not standing on much ceremony in making their selection.

The long dining-table glittered with massive silver plates and dishes and huge branching candlesticks with wax lights, the viands also being of the substantial order, and entirely of home manufacture or produce of the Barton Court domain, from the sirloin of beef to the two couples of woodcocks which occupied one dish in the third course, with jellies, creams, tarts, puddings (new college especially), and other kinds of confectionery from the housekeeper's room. The wines (a choice selection from the best vintages) were the product of foreign and warmer climes; but two large flagons of home-brewed ale and home-pressed cider, of bright and sparkling amber hue, graced the board, to which Newman Butler directed an inquiring look. "Ah, Butler!" exclaimed his host, observing his glance in that direction, "there is something there which I think will suit your palate."

"No doubt, Sir Lionel, some of the best."

"Then taste and try, Newman, before you buy. John," turning to the old butler, "a tumbler of your old ale to Mr. Butler."

"Yes, Sir Lionel;" and the next moment a tall beaker, frothed to the top, was handed by the old man, who stood by Butler, salver in hand, to watch its effect.

"Excellent, indeed," ejaculated Butler, as he returned the emptied glass; "sherry or madeira can't beat that, Sir Lionel."

"Glad you like it, Newman."

"He is a good judge of that beverage," remarked Conyers. "And now, John, I'll trouble you for a glass of the same."

Similar requests followed from other quarters, with which the old butler was highly delighted. The dinner-hour was passing pleasantly, though leisurely, away, Selina entertaining her neighbour, William Beauchamp, with many witty remarks in a low key, lest they might be overheard by her mamma, of whom alone she stood in some kind of awe. But Richard Vernon, who had seized upon the chair next Miss Douglas, watching her glances across the table to Beauchamp and his partner, resolved to have his revenge for her distant behaviour to himself.

"Miss Markham and Mr. Beauchamp appear mutually pleased with each other," he remarked; "in fact, her whispering speeches, and furtive glances towards Lady Markham, betray the nature of their conversation; don't you think so, Miss Douglas?"

"I really do not know to what you allude, Mr. Vernon."

"None are so blind as those who will not see," was the pointed reply.

"I can see nothing in Selina's conduct to-night different to what it generally is," she answered, in rather an indignant tone.

"Oh, indeed! Then, I suppose, you are also not aware of that which is the common topic of conversation in well-informed circles—Mr. William Beauchamp's unequivocal attentions to Miss Markham?"

The colour rose suddenly to Blanche's face, and was as suddenly succeeded by a death-like pallor, of which being herself aware, she seized a glass of wine in her right hand, being scarcely conscious of what she did, and swallowed the contents. Vernon watched her confusion with diabolical delight, adding, "My abrupt revelation has caused quite an unexpected exhibition of surprise on the part of Miss Douglas, but I suppose the news has not travelled quite so far as Throseby Hall."

"Nor anywhere else than through your own imagination, probably, Mr. Vernon;" with which she turned away, directing some observation to Captain Markham, and would not again notice anything addressed to her by Vernon.

On the retirement of the ladies to the drawing-room, Constance, taking Blanche's arm, inquired what fresh impertinence Vernon had been guilty of, having observed them sparring at at dinner, which called up again the blush on her friend's cheek.

"My dear Constance, he told me that your brother was seriously attached, if not engaged, to Selina Markham, and that everybody knew it, except myself."

"False, treacherous villain!" indignantly exclaimed Constance; "how dare he utter such a libel on my dear William? He in love with Selina!—heaven forefend!"

"But, perhaps, he may be attached to her, without entrusting you with his secrets," added Blanche.

"No, Blanche, that is impossible."

"But why is it impossible, dear Constance; can you tell me?"

"Yes, dear girl, I can; because I know he loves another—the very opposite in every respect to Miss Markham."

"Oh! who can that happy person be?" inquired Blanche, with a deep-drawn sigh. "Tell me, dear Constance, tell me her name!"

"I fear I have already said too much, dear Blanche; for William's secret is known to me alone, and I dare not divulge it."

"Oh, Constance!" whispered the poor girl in an agony of suspense, "pray tell me, dearest Constance!—your secret shall never pass my lips; on my honour, nothing shall wring it from me!"

"You may guess, dear Blanche, but I dare not tell you the name. Yet," putting her lips close to her ear, she whispered, "the person is in this room."

"Caroline?" inquired Blanche.

"No."

"Miss Raymond?"

"Certainly not."

"Then it must be one of the Misses Rolleston?"

"Neither of them, my dear. Try again."

"Miss Gwynne?"

"Very complimentary to William's taste, Blanche; but you must be quite sure she is not the object of his choice."

"Who, then, can it be, Constance, as there is only Aunt Gordon and myself left, of the unmarried ladies, in this room?"

"Most likely Aunt Gordon, my love," replied her friend, looking slyly and archly in her face; "my brother, you know, is always very attentive to her."

"Oh, nonsense, Constance! you are joking now, and laughing to think me so credulous."

"I never was more serious in my life, Blanche; the choice rests between Aunt Gordon and yourself. I must not compromise myself by saying more, except that, however amiable, I know William would never marry a widow. But here comes Selina."

"Well, children," she exclaimed, "what treason are you two girls concocting by yourselves in this snug corner? Plotting how you can be revenged on that arch-fiend, Dick Vernon, for his insolent behaviour to Blanche at dinner? What was he saying, my dear, to cause such angry looks to flash from those soft, dove-like eyes?"

"His remarks are so impertinent sometimes, that I cannot refrain, Selina, from exhibiting some resentment."

"And quite proper, too, my dear girl; it is very necessary for our sex to show men that thus far they may go, but no farther. Want of dignity and self-respect will always encourage such fops as Vernon to become troublesome, if not something more; so let him know, for the future, that he is to keep at a respectful distance."

"That, I hope, he knows already," replied Blanche.

"So much the better, dear; don't spare him, for you may rest assured he will not spare you."

Meanwhile, the dining-room rung with the cheerful voices of the old baronet's companions, who, under the good-humoured presidency of their warm-hearted host (no Lord Mervyn being present to damp their conviviality), indulged in their after-dinner jocularity without restraint. The last day's sport was run over again by the two veterans, and the arrangements for the ensuing week canvassed.

"I think," observed Mr. Compton, "it is my turn next, Mr. Beauchamp; we have plenty of foxes as well as pheasants, and Mrs. Compton and the children are quite impatient to see the hounds again."

"Whenever you like, Compton," replied the old squire, "after next week. Take your choice of the three days—Monday, Thursday, or Saturday."

"The last, then," said Compton, "as I promised to let some friends know the first regular fixture for our place."

"Well, Compton," said Conyers, "I wish your keeper would give Lord Mervyn the receipt for preserving foxes and pheasants under the same crust. His won't keep together; yours always do, and both last good till the end of the season."

"Everything depends on the seasoning supplied to the head-cook," replied Compton, good-humouredly, "which I never spare. In fact, he would get a peppering himself, if foxes and pheasants were not found in the same covert, and both good of their kind."

"I never tasted a roast fox," said Conyers, "although I have heard of a fool who once ordered one for dinner. But I'll bear testimony to the flavour of your pheasants; and the hounds seem to relish your foxes, too, by the way they so pertinaciously follow in their wake across country. Why, let me see, or think, rather, of my memorandum-book for last season, which records the eating of nine foxes out of ten, from Compton's little spinnies, and all despatched after capital runs—pretty good for a game-preserver, and no fox-hunter! Well, Compton, you are one of the right sort, barring an error in your education; but when your son and heir comes home for the Christmas holidays, I have promised Mrs. Compton to give him a few preliminary lessons in the art of horsemanship, and I hope he'll turn out a fox-hunter—that's all the harm I shall do for him. And he won't make the worse statesman for having a knowledge of the wiles of Charles James Fox—Sir Francis, there, is an example of that sort, who can take the lead in the House of Commons, as well as over the pastures of Leicestershire—egad, sir, rode two of the quickest things we have had this season, only yesterday, with his arm in a sling!"

"Why, Conyers!" exclaimed Sir Francis, "you are becoming personally offensive to-night—that comes of mixing malt liquor and wine together—and the result is, that you are running riot most wondrously, and require the lash for babbling."

"Ah, very likely, Burnett, the old saying, 'When the wine is in, the wit comes out,' or, rather, in old Horace's version, 'The truth comes out.'"

"Talking of malt liquor," said Fred Beauchamp, "puts me in mind of a little scrimmage yesterday, whilst the hounds were running in covert, between that vendor of swipes, Brewer Suction, and Lawyer Dryasdust. The origin of their differences I could not ascertain, but something about a bill of costs; high words ensued, the lawyer applying some insulting language to the brewer about hog's-wash and tobacco-juice used in his beer. Old Suction's dander was up in a minute, and in return he called Dryasdust a cheating, rascally quill-driver. Retorts, anything but courteous, followed from both parties, when the brewer's wrath bust forth like the froth from one of his newly-filled beer-barrels, and he rode at the lawyer, double-thong in hand, challenging him to a tournament on horseback, or a fight on foot. 'Form a ring, gentleman,' cried Farmer Turvill; 'let 'em have it out—I'll back the brewer.' 'Two to one on the lawyer,' shouted Williams, the sporting Vet. 'I'll be bottle-holder,' cried a third. 'Come on,' roared Suction; 'I'll make thy hide rattle like one of thy villanous parchments.'

"'No, gentlemen,' said the lawyer, 'I scorn to touch with my little finger such a low blackguard.'

"'Low blackguard am I?' quoth Suction. 'Then take that for thy insolence;' with which he dealt Dryasdust such a wipe across the shoulders with his heavy crop, that he made him twist again. 'A fight, a fight,' arose on all sides, 'have it out.' 'I won't fight,' screamed the lawyer; 'my weapon is the pen, and I'll bring an action for assault and battery.' 'In for a penny, in for a pound,' shouted Suction, and at him he went, laying it on thick and fast, until the lawyer fairly bolted, and galloped from the field, the brewer after him, Dryasdust keeping a retreating fire of words, with 'heavy damages, bill of costs, five hundred pounds, d—— him, ruin him.'"

"This brings to my recollection," said Vernon, "a running fight I witnessed in town, last summer, between two Jew boys, one following the other, and belabouring him with his clothes-bag, the pursued crying out appealingly to the passers-by, 'Ain't he spiteful, now, ain't he spiteful?' pointing to his nasal organ, dropping blood, as he bustled along the street."

The introduction of coffee was a hint to Sir Lionel and his friends that their presence was now required in the drawing-room, which failed not in being obeyed, deep potations not then being the fashion.

Constance and Blanche were seated together on an ottoman sipping their tea, when William Beauchamp joined them, a seat being offered by his sister between them, which he gladly accepted. Old John, the butler, had just entered the room; and, in passing with several smoking cups on his tray, piping hot from the housekeeper's room, his foot caught in the leg of a chair, and he would have precipitated the scalding liquid over Blanche Douglas, but for the quick eye and rapid movement of William Beauchamp, who sprang up before her, and received the contents over his own person.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" cried the old man. "To think that I should have done such a thing to you, Mr. William."

"Better to me than Miss Douglas, my old friend."

"But you must be dreadfully scalded, sir," he added, "all through my awkwardness! What can I do?"

"Oh! William!" exclaimed Constance, jumping up to his aid. "Are you much hurt?"

"No, no, dear, not in the least. My best front and waistcoat are alone a little damaged."

"More than that, I expect, my boy," said Sir Lionel, walking hastily up. "Come with me, Will, directly, and change your things," and he followed his host from the room.

Blanche neither spoke nor rose from her seat; but her quivering lip and flushed face betrayed her emotion, which did not pass unnoticed by Mrs. Harcourt, whose attention was directed to the scene. But Constance (with a woman's quick perception of her feelings), standing before her friend to screen her from observation, stooped as if to examine her dress, and whispered, "Don't be alarmed, dear Blanche—all eyes are upon us—my brother is not hurt."

"Oh, how kind of him to save me at his own risk!" she replied. "I am sure he must be dreadfully scalded."

"Oh, no, my dear girl; I hope the tea was not very hot."

In a few minutes, Sir Lionel returned to the room, when Vernon asked, in a sneering tone, if Mr. William Beauchamp was so seriously injured as to require surgical assistance.

"Not that, sir," replied Sir Lionel, indignantly, "although his chest is like a raw piece of beef; but, thank God, he saved Blanche Douglas, poor child, from what would have been a serious injury to her fair skin, through the blundering of that old fool John."

"What a fuss about a cup of tea!" again sneered Vernon.

"Hark'e, sir," said the baronet, now thoroughly roused; "no more of your sneers, or I'll throw the next relay that comes into your lap, and you'll hop higher than ever you did in a hornpipe."

"Never perpetrated such a monstrosity, Sir Lionel; that dance only suits such high-flyers as Miss Selina."

"I'll make you dance to *some purpose* presently," muttered that mischievous young lady to herself, with which intent she approached Mr. Vernon, who was lolling in an easy chair, and began thanking him, in mocking terms, for his polite allusion to her gymnastic exercises, at the same time beckoning the servant, who held the salver, to take an empty cup she had in her hand. But on his approaching with two other full cups on the tray, with a touch of her elbow, the contents were adroitly tipped over into her persecutor's lap. In an instant he was on his legs, hopping and jumping about with the pain.

"Hang it, madam," he exclaimed in a furious passion; "these practical jokes of yours are intolerable."

"Oh, la!" she exclaimed; "what a fuss Mr. Vernon makes about a cup of tea!"

"Demmit, Vernon, you can hop a bit, though; thought you were trying an Irish jig."

"And yet," said Selina, "the tea could not be very hot, having been in the room ever since Mr. Beauchamp left it."

"Disagreeable, though, 'pon honour," remarked the Captain. "So come along, Dick, I'll rig you out."

As they quitted the room, Lady Markham severely reprimanded Selina for her conduct.

"Dear mamma," pleaded the young lady, "don't be angry; if my brother does not choose to protect me from the impertinence of that flippant puppy, I will not allow him to insult me, as he does other ladies, with impunity."

William Beauchamp, at this moment, entered the room, arrayed in one of the baronet's waistcoats, which excited the risibility of his cousin Fred.

"Well, Will, you look like a second Falstaff; 'hang a calf-skin round his recreant limbs!'"

"Fortunate, my boy, all are not of such spare dimensions as yourself," replied Beauchamp; "even the Captain's would not fit; but in Sir Lionel's vestment, although a little too long, I feel myself a person of much greater importance than I did half an hour ago."

"And so you are, Will—look the baronet all over."

"You cannot pay me a higher compliment, Fred;" with which he passed over to where Constance, Blanche, and Conyers were sitting.

"How do you feel now, Beauchamp?" asked the latter.

"Quite well, Bob, thank you; it raised a bit of a rash, nothing more. But I fear," he said, addressing Blanche, "you were frightened by my awkwardness in nearly falling upon you; but the whole thing was so sudden, that I could scarcely keep my footing."

"I was not alarmed on my own account," she replied, timidly; "but I am sure you are hurt, in protecting me, more than you choose to confess."

"Indeed, I am not," he said; and lowering his voice to a whisper, added, "willingly, most willingly, dear Blanche, would I risk my life to protect you from harm;" which caused the blood to rush to her very forehead, so deeply did these words strike to her heart. Mrs. Harcourt's keen glance noticed Beauchamp's impressive manner to her niece, as well as her evident confusion at his words, and walking across to where they were sitting, begged Constance and Blanche to sing the last duet they had been practising together. Refusal was out of the question; and as the two girls rose to go to the piano, Mrs. Harcourt detained Beauchamp by asking his advice about her pet spaniel, but, in reality, to detach him from her niece, and try to discover his true feelings towards her. After the dog's malady had been discussed, she asked, "Don't you think Blanche very much improved in her singing, Mr. Beauchamp?"

"Yes, indeed, she is," was the frank reply; "she sings charmingly, and is a sweet, unaffected girl."

"She must not now be treated as a girl any longer, Mr. Beauchamp, having nearly reached her eighteenth year; and she is to be introduced, as I dare say you have heard, at our next Christmas ball; and considering her position, fortune, and personal attractions, Mr. Harcourt and myself are justified, I think, in expecting that she will form some high matrimonial connection."

"There is no station, save one, to which Miss Douglas may not aspire," replied Beauchamp, in the same quiet, indifferent tone of voice.

"We certainly shall not give our consent to her marrying any person who has not an equivalent in fortune or in rank; but I believe she is already attached to her cousin, Lord Malcolm, whom we are expecting at Throseby, next month."

Her eyes were riveted on Beauchamp as she uttered this last sentence, but a steady, firm look was all she could discover there—no embarrassment was perceptible; only a slight curl on his upper lip told Mrs. Harcourt, as plainly as words, that Wiliam Beauchamp thoroughly understood her. She was not, however, aware of a fact, known as yet to himself and one other person only, that Lord Malcolm's affections had been given to another.

Relieved from Mrs. Harcourt's catechising, and roused by her insinuation, Beauchamp took his revenge by immediately joining Blanche and Constance, who now left the piano, and he attached himself to them for the remainder of the evening.

On returning to the drawing-room, Vernon remarked this happy party, and again began his comments to Mrs. Harcourt on Beauchamp's attentions to her niece.

"Did you notice Miss Douglas," he asked, "when the accident happened, by that old stupid man upsetting the tea?"

"Yes," she said, "Mr. Vernon, I did; and any young girl, when suddenly frightened, as she must have been, would naturally change colour and feel agitated; even at my age, such an occurrence would have made me nervous. But Mr. Beauchamp has been enlightened by me, since you left the room, as to our expectations with regard to my niece, and the communication was received with the most perfect indifference, so that I am quite satisfied his intentions are merely those of a neighbour to one he has known from childhood; particularly as I informed him, also, of Blanche's attachment to her cousin, Lord Malcolm, which did not excite the least surprise."

"Well, Mrs. Harcourt, although you may be satisfied, I am not."

"And pray, Mr. Vernon, may I ask, why you take such an extraordinary interest in my niece?"

"Simply, madam, because I should be sorry to see her thrown away upon such a clod of a fox-hunter as Will Beauchamp."

"Indeed, Mr. Vernon, I ought to feel much obliged by your anxiety for her welfare; but I think some refined young gentlemen might take a lesson from the *clod*, Will Beauchamp, in his respectful attentions to ladies; he, at least, never forgets what is due to our sex."

Vernon was stunned by this retort, and did not again renew the subject; but exasperated now against Mrs. Harcourt, as well as her niece and Beauchamp, and meditating revenge, he turned sullenly away.

The company began, soon after, to disperse, and on leaving, the hand of Will Beauchamp lingered in that of Blanche Douglas with rather a long and warm pressure, as he wished her good night.

CHAPTER VI.

The Tuesday following, early, Beauchamp rode over to the Priory, to keep his engagement with Mrs. Gordon; and on being ushered into the drawing-room, there, to his astonishment, sat Blanche Douglas. Starting with surprise at so unexpectedly meeting her, with whom his thoughts had been so busily engaged during his ride, and up to the moment of entering the room, he stammered forth something about the unlooked-for pleasure of seeing her at the Priory. His confusion did not escape the fair girl, who rose and held out her hand to greet him with a cheerful smile; although her embarrassment more than equalled his own.

"You did not expect to meet me here, then?" she said.

"Oh, no. I did not anticipate so early and delightful a reunion, after our last meeting, as Mrs. Gordon merely asked me to assist her in some alterations she was making in her garden. But when did you arrive?"

"Yesterday; aunt sent the carriage for me, and I am to remain with her a week."

"Then I hope," said Beauchamp, "she will require my services as head-gardener for the same period. It is so seldom, dear Blanche," said he, as he sat down, and took her hand in his, which he felt trembling at his touch; "it is so seldom we now meet, as we used to do; but the heiress of Ardwell must no longer be to her friends the Blanche Douglas of happier days—at least, so Mrs. Harcourt told me the other evening."

"Did she tell *you* so, Mr. Beauchamp?"

"Yes," he replied, mournfully; "and are not her words nearly confirmed, when Blanche's old friend William is addressed as Mr. Beauchamp?"

"And yet," she said, timidly, though firmly, "Blanche Douglas will, I hope, ever be Blanche Douglas to William Beauchamp and his dear sister Constance."

"Heaven grant it!" he replied, fervently; "unchanged in heart, though I must not expect in name. Next month you will make your *début* in public, as the heiress; and oh! Blanche, think you not of the homage (your just due) which will then be offered at your feet by the rich, the titled, and the gay, all eager for a share of those sunny smiles, by which the heart of William Beauchamp has been so often gladdened, when pressing the hand he now holds within his own. Fearful to me, alas! will be that change, whose coming I dread, as about to separate us for ever."

"Oh, never, William, believe me, can I so change towards you, as to prefer new acquaintances, however agreeable, to old and well-tried friends."

A tap at the window made Beauchamp spring from the sofa, and there stood Aunt Gordon; but how long she had been there, he did not then know. Blanche at the same moment hurried from the room, to put on her bonnet; and Beauchamp, taking up his hat, hastened to meet Mrs. Gordon in the garden, who, shaking hands with him most cordially, said, "So, William, instead of coming to help Aunt Gordon in her garden, you have been occupied in the drawing-room making love to her niece. What have you to say, sir, to this grave charge? guilty, or not guilty?"

"Not guilty, dear Aunt Gordon."

"Then why that heightened colour and averted eye? I expected candour, not evasion, from William Beauchamp," she replied, looking offended.

"From you, my dear, kind friend," said Beauchamp, "I have no concealments; you have a double right to know what I said to Blanche, and every word I have spoken to her shall be repeated to you." He then related the conversation which had passed between them, which had arisen from Mrs. Harcourt's observations to him the other night, and the melancholy reflections that had filled his mind ever since, that Blanche Douglas would soon be lost to him for ever.

"So then, William, you do love my niece, notwithstanding your plea of not guilty to making love just now?"

"Dear Aunt Gordon, I will not deny that her happiness is dearer, far dearer to me than my life; but there is a barrier between us which cannot be passed. Her guardian expects she will marry a person either of high rank, or, at least, of fortune equal to her own, which is but reasonable; and there can be little doubt, that on her entrance into the world, her beauty and attractions, joined with that far greater recommendation, money, will immediately cause even coronets to be laid at her feet. What, then! should I selfishly endeavour (by gaining this dear girl's early affections) to debar her from all those glittering, lofty prospects in life, to which she is so justly entitled? No, my dear madam, it cannot, and shall not be said of Will Beauchamp, that he ever stood in the path of Blanche Douglas (even had he the power to do so), to prevent her promotion to a higher sphere, in which she is so eminently qualified to shine."

"Then it is the opinion of Mr. William Beauchamp, that honours and riches are the only things which can confer happiness?"

"One would think so," he replied, "by the avidity with which they are so universally sought after. But surely the fortunate possessors of great talents or endowments may lawfully aspire to, and accept, any further preferment offered them, as a just tribute to their deserts."

"Then, in your opinion, Blanche, being a very worldly-minded young lady, aspires to the rank of a duchess, or marchioness, at least?"

"Far be it from me," replied Beauchamp; "to impute worldly considerations to a mind so pure, unselfish, and artless, as that of your dear, kind-hearted, unaffected niece; but my meaning was simply this: among the aristocracy, there are to be found more men of refined ideas, gentlemanly conduct, and high character (and you must admit of much more polished manners), than in any other class of gentlemen, taking an equal number from either. And such being the case, which I do not think will be disputed, there can be no just cause, why Blanche should refuse the offer of any young nobleman who might render himself agreeable to her. She is herself of very old family, already connected with some of the highest rank, and, with the addition of a large landed property, she may, without being accused of worldly-mindedness, or ambition, compete with any duke's daughter in the land."

"This may be all true, my dear William," replied Mrs.

Gordon, "except that, among our young nobility, there are many who would not be slow to woo any young heiress for the sake of her money only. But supposing Blanche were no heiress, after all, and dependent only on her aunt Gordon for anything she might be able to leave her, would you, in that case, make an avowal of your love?"

"Not even in that case, dear aunt Gordon, would I now fetter her with an engagement to myself, which, in mixing more with the world, she might afterwards seriously repent. In my opinion, every young girl should have a fair allowance of time and opportunities of selecting a husband from more general society, before being encumbered by an early and perhaps imprudent attachment. We think some things very beautiful, until we see others more beautiful."

"Very true, William; but we ought to love human beings, not for their beauty of person, but their beauty of mind."

"And yet a handsome person is, at first sight, a great attraction both to men and women."

"Well, then, your meaning is this, that my niece Blanche is first to have her choice of all the handsome, gay young men, (numbers of whom will, no doubt, be trying hard to carry off the prize), and failing to find one of that number suited to her requirements, she can fall back upon William Beauchamp as a *dernier ressort*, who promises to hold himself disengaged the while, and await patiently her royal decision."

"Even so, dear aunt, for I am not likely to change."

"Then you are one of the most romantic simpletons I have ever had the honour of being acquainted with, William Beauchamp. In fact, this is your weak point; but now listen to my opinion. I have long known you as a high-spirited, generous-hearted boy, and am foolish enough to love you as my own son. Think you, then, that I will permit your happiness to be risked on such a hazard as this, in which my dear Blanche will be equally compromised, if (as, I believe, is the case) she really loves you as much as you do her? No, William, it shall not be. Mr. Harcourt is not her only guardian; I am one also, and without our joint consent, she cannot marry, until of age. He is worldly-minded and ambitious; I am the reverse, and in marriage, I know well, the only lasting happiness can arise from true and devoted attachment, founded on esteem of character, with fixed and firm principles of virtue and religion. You are the only young man I have yet met with, to whom I could with confidence intrust my dear Blanche; and now that I know you do love her, with my consent she shall never marry any other man."

"Nay, nay, my dear, kind friend, this you must not say; for if Blanche should prefer another to me, so far from preventing, I would do all in my power to promote her happiness in a union with that man, even though that act should consign me, as it doubtless would, to hopeless despair."

"My dear boy," replied Mrs. Gordon, "where could Blanche find one of truer nobility of mind than William Beauchamp?"

"Many, perhaps, more worthy of her love."

"Never," replied Mrs. Gordon, "were she to search through the whole world."

"Then, at any rate, I shall not be satisfied, till she has had the opportunity of trying whether such a person does exist or not. And you must promise me, dear aunt, moreover, never to reveal the disclosure I have made to you this morning, or you will never see me at the Priory again."

"That promise it is unnecessary for me to give, loving you as I do, and you may safely confide your happiness and honour to my keeping; those, I promise you, shall not be compromised; but here comes Blanche—don't blush, or look foolish."

"Where have you been wandering, dear aunt?" she inquired. "I have been looking for you in the flower garden, and through all the walks, in vain."

"Well, dear child, I am sorry to have occasioned you so much trouble, but I took William to this point for a full view of the lawn, before we commenced our work of cutting it into beds; but, bless me, how forgetful I am to-day!—where is Constance all this time?"

"She will be here to luncheon," replied Beauchamp; "but having some letters to write, I rode over first."

"Well, then, now to our business. Go, dear Blanche, and bring that book of designs from the conservatory, and whilst I call the gardener with his string and pegs to mark out, you and William can look over the book, and choose what you like best."

"Well, aunt," said Beauchamp, "we will wait your return in the conservatory, which is a more congenial atmosphere than this on a November day."

Blanche appeared at first rather indisposed to this arrangement, fearing further disclosures from Beauchamp; but they were soon after busily engaged in comparing the various merits of Catherine wheels, Gothic roses, Maltese crosses, and such like devices.

"Some of these are very pretty," remarked Beauchamp; "but the idea of a new pattern has struck me;" and taking out his pencil, he drew a small design, with two B's and two D's opposite to each other, but joined, forming four beds; the centre turf to be occupied by a standard rose tree, and the four letters as beds for violets, pansies, forget-me-nots, and heliotrope. Handing it to Blanche, he was asking her opinion, when Mrs. Gordon joined them.

"What is it you have been figuring?" she asked.

"Something quite new and emblematical," he replied; "B and D stand for Blanche Douglas—now you must guess, of what the flowers are emblematical. The rose tree?"

"Beauty, of course," replied Aunt Gordon.

"Blue and white violets; what do they represent?"

Blanche and her aunt guessed at once—modesty and candour. "And very appropriate too," remarked Mrs. Gordon.

"Pansies?"

The two ladies guessed in vain.

"Think of me," said Beauchamp, which brought a blush into Blanche's cheek. "Forget-me-not follows as a matter of course. The last bed is to be filled with heliotrope, the meaning of which I shall leave you both to find out. So now, dear aunt, if you approve the design, let us carry it out at once."

"Approve it, William? I am quite delighted with it. This flower-bed will be my pet, of all others, ever reminding me of dear Blanche, when she may be separated from me, and of that kind boy who suggested it, as a memorial emblematical of her I love so tenderly. But now, dear William, tell me the language of the heliotrope, that I may have my lesson complete."

"I cannot indeed tell you, dear aunt, so you must really set your wits to work to find it out."

"Will you then tell Blanche?"

"I would rather not," he replied, "unless she is particularly anxious to know."

"That, I am sure, she is—are you not, my love? so ask William what the heliotrope means."

"Will you tell me, William?" she inquired, approaching him.

"Yes, dear Blanche, but you only;" and whispering in her ear, he murmured, "The heliotrope, in the language of flowers, is, *I love you!*"

At these words the colour rose on Blanche's cheeks, mounting to her very forehead, and her agitation became too perceptible.

"Have I offended you, dear Blanche?" inquired Beauchamp, gently taking her hand, as she was turning away. "Will you forgive this little escapade? Not for worlds would I offer a word to you, which might prove displeasing or presuming. The heliotrope shall be discarded, and my words recalled, if you desire it."

"Indeed, I am not offended, William," she replied.

"Then give me your hand, dear Blanche; we must find the heliotrope another meaning for Aunt Gordon. Constancy, that will do much better—and here she comes, Constance herself, tripping across the lawn."

"What are you all about?" she inquired, kissing Blanche, and running to Mrs. Gordon to confer on her the same favour.

"Guessing the language of flowers, and you are just in time to exhibit in person the last emblem of the heliotrope," added Beauchamp, "which, I have told Blanche, means constancy, Constance Beauchamp."

"Oh, that is what you have been whispering about, is it, Mr. William? I thought there must be something very interesting to you both."

"Well, aunt, the secret is out at last, you see, and now we will finish the bed, if possible, before luncheon," with which he set to work at once with the line and pegs to mark out the figure; Constance, with Blanche, running off to the conservatory for the other patterns.

"Well," said Constance, looking through the book; "there is nothing very new here, so I will suggest another device to stand opposite to Blanche Douglas—C. B., Constance Beauchamp."

"Oh, that will be quite charming, and, I think, a better pattern than mine," replied Blanche.

"No, dear girl, I cannot stand in comparison with you in a garden or a ball-room, but am content to occupy a less prominent position; in love and affection do I only claim to be your equal. And now you shall select the flowers to fill my beds, as William did for yours."

In these innocent recreations and amusements, the day passed rapidly away, until nearly four o'clock, when Bob Conyers appeared on the scene, and highly applauded the patterns which had been cut out by the gardener on the lawn. "But these two," he said, "the inventions of William and Constance, please me more than anything I have yet seen in the shape of flower beds, and, with the emblems selected for them, are quite perfection."

The evening now turning cold and damp, an adjournment was made to the house, and at six o'clock the five staunch friends sat down to dinner, no other company being asked.

"Ah, well!" exclaimed Bob, "this is quite delightful! a snug, cozy family party, without forms or ceremonies, and, after dinner, we will all draw round to the fireside, and thoroughly enjoy ourselves."

"But we cannot sit drinking port-wine and claret with you gentlemen," replied Mrs. Gordon.

"Oh, yes, you can, and must, to-night, and we shall see who will be under the table first, a lady or a gentleman," he added, playfully. "Will and I can't stand more than a bottle a-piece, and, I expect, will be floored before the ladies. Then I'll sing some pretty songs, give toasts, and talk of fox-hunting and love-making; we'll have a jolly night of it, won't we, Constance?"

"I suspect we should, indeed, and a queer morning, too, were we all to finish our bottle round, as you propose; and fine entertainment it would afford the ladies'-maids, in carrying their mistresses up-stairs to bed."

"By Jove! that would be something quite *outré*, as the monsieurs have it; and I should like to see old Harcourt's phiz, when the news reached him of the heiress being rather the worse for liquor."

"Really, Mr. Conyers," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, "I fear you are already half seas over, and not fit for ladies' society, to hear you run on in this ridiculous strain."

"Oh, no, my dear madam, I have taken nothing to-day, before I sat down to your hospitable board, since my breakfast; but my spirits are quite elated, in this friendly little party, all looking so joyous and happy. And now, ladies (after the dessert had been placed on the table), I vote we remove to the fireside, and, with a table in the centre, make ourselves comfortable, until you are tired of Beauchamp and myself." The vote being seconded, and carried without opposition, Bob continued—"As I will not venture on a toast with 'Fill the bumpers fair,' I will give you a sentiment instead; and now, join all hands round—'May no worldly considerations, or evil influences, sever this link of hands and hearts, now joined so happily together.'"

"Amen," responded Mrs. Gordon, fervently; "may they never be rent asunder, but by the hand of Death."

"Hark!" exclaimed Conyers, "how the rain patters against the windows! By Jove! we shall have a terrible night to drive home in."

"There is no necessity for your going," replied Mrs. Gordon; "there are beds for you all."

"I must return home," said Conyers, "having a very early engagement to-morrow morning."

"Then Constance must stay, at least, as she drove over in the phaeton, and I will not allow her to return in it, such a night as this; you, gentlemen, can do as you please."

To this arrangement Constance at first demurred; but being overruled by Mrs. Gordon and Blanche's entreaties, consented to remain—her brother promising to drive over the next day, and take her home.

After the gentlemen had left the Priory that night, no allusion was made by Blanche to her friend about her brother's conduct, neither did Constance mention his name. Mrs. Gordon also wisely forebore, during Blanche's stay with her, to make the slightest remark, which might lead her niece to suppose that William Beauchamp had ever intrusted her with the secret of his heart. But Blanche pondered long and deeply on his words, and treasured up a little sprig of heliotrope he had given her (unperceived by any one), at parting, the day he drove over his sister.

CHAPTER VII.

We must now pass over a few days, until the fixture at Lord Mervyn's seat, Marston Castle, when a grand collation was prepared, of which few were disposed to partake, notwithstanding Will Beauchamp's leading the way, and pressing others to follow his example. His lordship was no favourite with any of the old county families, and his very look gave the lie direct to any friendly or hospitable feeling. The fox-hunting community saw, at a glance, that his grand breakfast was only a sham and pretext to allay their well-grounded suspicions of his destruction to their sport; and none, save a few of the most zealous supporters of the hunt, who deemed it an act of policy to present themselves in his breakfast-room, would condescend to enter within the vestibule of Marston Castle.

Avoided by his son, feared by his daughter, and despised by his wife, Lord Mervyn stood aloof, even from his own family;

and although possessing a large circle of acquaintances, friendship or love were to him unknown.

It being impossible to dispel the gloom and formality which presided at the breakfast-table (a misnomer, indeed, as far as his guests were concerned, who had breakfasted at home), where everything remained untasted, save a few glasses of liqueurs, a proposal was made by Beauchamp to commence the business of the day, as a large company had assembled in front of the castle, more from curiosity to watch the proceedings of this eventful day (the first on which the hounds had ever been invited to grace the lawn of Marston Castle) than from any expectation of sport.

"Ah, here he comes at last," exclaimed old Farmer Stubbins as Lord Mervyn appeared at the hall-door, "with his long lantern jaws and vinegar looks, enough to turn a pan of new milk; but I be'ant to be gammoned, if the gentlefolk be. I wouldn't take sup nor bite at his board, for fear of being poison'd or choked; dang it, neighbour Stiles, he's a bad un!"

"Ay, ay, Stubbins, there's not much doubt about that; but there's something in the wind now—election time's drawing on again, so my lord is playing a new game—courts the red coats and the fox-hunting farmers this time; but 'twon't do, Mr. Stubbins."

"'Tis no use his courting me, Mr. Stiles, for I'll never vote for kith or kin of his; but I say, neighbor, where's the ould squire? doant see his face here, I'll warrant—ould birds bean't caught wi' chaff."

"Nor young uns, neither, Stubbins, of that family; for the young squire looks as if he'd been swallowing summut as don't sit very light on his stomach this morning. But there, you see, being master now, and manager of the pack, he is obliged to be civil to all parties, to keep things together; and nobody can blame him for trying to make friends with my lord there; but a man half blind can see it goes all against the grain."

Lord Mervyn's shooting cob being brought to the door, the hounds were trotted off to Marston Wood, which was almost alive with game, hares and rabbits scurrying across the drives by scores, and pheasants whizzing up into the air in all directions. Not a whimper, however, was heard from a single hound, as the pack dashed through the underwood, with the whippers-in in close attendance, to prevent any hares, which might be chopped, from being eaten.

Soon a holloa was heard and repeated in one of the by-drives, to which locality Will Beauchamp immediately repaired, but not with his usual alacrity.

"A fox just crossed over here, sir," said one of the under-keepers, still holloaing with all his might.

"That's noise enough," shouted Beauchamp; "which way is he gone?"

"There, sir, just before your horse's nose."

The hounds were on the spot, but looking about only—they would not own the scent. "Very odd," remarked the keeper; "I swear I saw the fox not ten minutes agone, close to that little oak."

At this moment several halloas were heard in the large drive, where Lord Mervyn was posted, with Sir Francis, Bob Conyers, and many more.

"Here he crossed!" exclaimed Sir Francis, as Beauchamp galloped up with the pack. Still not a hound would speak to the scent, although they dashed into the wood, spreading far and wide.

"What's the meaning of this, Beauchamp?" inquired Sir Francis, in surprise; "there's not an atom of scent this morning; they can't even own it."

"They *won't* own it, Sir Francis," replied Beauchamp, with a strong emphasis on the "won't."

"Ha! ha!" said Bob, "I thought as much; he's a bagman, Will."

"No doubt of it," replied the master; "but hark! Charley views him now; let us go and hear what *he* says."

The hounds were round the whipper-in, when Beauchamp, Bob, Sir Francis, and Lord Mervyn rode up. "What's the matter, Charles?" asked Beauchamp; "the hounds won't run the fox."

"Because, sir, he's been shook out of a bag, this morning, or the keeper's long pocket."

"It's false, sir!" shouted Lord Mervyn, with his usual impetuosity; "how dare a servant offer his opinion in that manner?"

"Simply because, my good lord," replied Sir Francis, "it was his duty to do so, when asked by his master."

"I will soon satisfy you, Sir Francis, and all the gentlemen," said Charley, touching his cap, "that I am no liar." And begging his master to ride with the hounds through the upper part of the wood, he disappeared. In a few minutes after, the report of a gun was heard and a single whoop from Charley, who came trotting down the large drive, with the dead fox on his saddle. "Now, Sir Francis," said the whipper-in, throwing the carcass on the ground, "there's the bagman, with the mark of the collar on his neck, and his brush full of oat chaff, and if any hound touches him, I'm a liar."

Old Rambler walked up, and, cocking his leg against his dead foe, turned sulkily away. Not a hound offered to touch him, all leaving him as he lay. Sir Francis and Bob Conyers dismounted to examine also, the former exclaiming—

"You are quite right, Charley; he is a bagman, and no mistake!"

Lord Mervyn was furious, declaring he would discharge all his keepers, if he could discover they had been concerned in the business.

"I think you ought to dismiss one, at least," replied Sir Francis, "for serving us such a dirty trick. But now for finding a wild fox—the day is slipping away."

"I am at his lordship's commands, to draw what covers he pleases," replied Beauchamp.

"You can try where you like, Mr. Beauchamp; all, every hedgerow of which I am the owner."

"Very well, my lord; it shall be done as you desire." With which, they quitted Marston Wood.

"I say, Charley," asked Bob Conyers, riding by his side, "how did you manage to get hold of that gun?"

"Easily enough, sir. I went to where the head-keeper was standing in the other drive—just the place where foxes generally cross over—and getting off my horse, asked him to hold him a minute, while I went into the high wood. There lay the gun against that tree. 'Mr. Sharpum,' I said, 'my horse don't like the smell of powder, and don't you speak or move, for I think the fox is coming our way.' Sharpum fell into the trap nicely, when, in a few seconds, I heard a bit of a stir among the leaves, and, sure enough, the poor devil of a fox came trotting down to where I was standing. Then, stepping quickly back to Mr. Sharpum, with my finger on my lips to keep quiet, I seized the gun, and, before he guessed what I was up to, knocked over the bagman. 'What do you mean by that?' growled out Sharpum. 'You will soon know,' said I; and taking hold of my horse, picked up the fox and galloped away."

"Cleverly done, by Jove, Charley! You are up to a dodge or two, as well as your namesake."

All Lord Mervyn's coverts, every hedgerow almost, were drawn blank; and not a challenge was heard from any hound, until they reached a small gorse covert, belonging to Farmer Stiles, on the outskirts of Marston Manor, from which, at half-past three o'clock, a fine old fox was viewed away, and run into, within twenty minutes.

"Short and sweet!" exclaimed Sir Francis, as they pulled him down in the open.

"Too short for such a fox as that," remarked Bob; "he ought to have stood an hour at least. Something queer about his being finished in twenty minutes; what is it, Charley?"

"A little more of Mr. Sharpum's handywork, sir," handing Bob one of the forepads, all the toes of which had been cut off by a trap, and the wound scarcely healed.

"Confound that fellow Mervyn!" exclaimed Sir Lucius Gwynne; "he wants a devilish good horsewhipping—making fools of all the field, this morning, with that bagman, and trapping every fox that puts his nose within his boundaries! Egad, gentlemen, I propose we all have a day's shooting in his preserves, and see how he will like our spoiling his sport."

"Ay, ay!" responded several voices—"serve him right!—we will join you any day at that fun!"

"Stop a little, Gwynne," said Sir Francis; "give him another chance; and if we don't find a sound fox the next time the hounds draw Marston, put my name on the list for the shooting party."

When the fox was thrown to the hounds, Will Beauchamp rode up to Mr. Stiles, and shaking him by the hand, thanked him for the fox found in his covert.

"Welcome, squire, welcome to a dozen, if I could keep 'em there! We had a fine litter bred this season in that patch of gorse, but they're all trapped, save the old dog, which the hounds are now eating."

"I'm sorry to hear it, Stiles," replied Beauchamp; "but we know your good disposition to the foxes, although your neighbours won't allow you to keep them."

"Ah!" sneered Vernon to a friend, or rather guest of Lord Mervyn's; "that fellow, Beauchamp, wins the hearts of those clodhoppers, the farmers, by shaking their dirty hands."

"Handling the plough is not half such dirty work as handling the dice-box!" exclaimed a dashing young farmer, who overheard Vernon's remarks.

"And who are you?—you insolent blackguard!" demanded Vernon, turning sharply round upon him.

"My name is Hazel," retorted the young man; "and if you don't beg my pardon, this minute, for calling me an insolent blackguard, I'll blacken your face with my dirty hand, and knock you off your horse, into the bargain!" then riding close up to him, with his clenched fist, Vernon showed the white feather, murmuring out some apology. "And now, Mr. Vernon," said Hazel, "I'll just warn you to keep a civil tongue in your mouth. We dirty-handed farmers work hard enough to turn an honest penny, which is more than you do; and if you give us any more of your sauce, we know how to prevent your insulting us in the field, whatever you may say behind our backs."

It being then very late, the hounds returned to the kennels.

We will now transfer our readers, in imagination, to the dining-room of Marston Castle, where, seated round the fire, after the ladies had retired, were Lord Mervyn, Richard Vernon, and Mr. Harper (his lordship's right-hand man in electioneering affairs). The conversation turned on the events of the day, and Lord Mervyn was bitterly inveighing against the insolence of Beauchamp's whipper-in, in shooting the fox.

"Were I in your situation, my lord," remarked Vernon, "I would warn Beauchamp and the whole crew off my lands."

"That I cannot do, Vernon, or we should lose our election, next year, for my son; and, at this moment, every vote is of consequence to the government."

"Well, then, after the election; it will do then."

"Change of ministry, dissolution of Parliament—all such contingencies have to be considered," replied Lord Mervyn, "so that a seat in the Commons is never secure for any certain period in these changing times. No, no, Vernon; we can safely and successfully wage war against the foxes, and lay the blame on the keepers, but as to waging war with all the fox-hunters and fox-hunting farmers, that is too bold a stroke to venture upon. The whole country would be up in arms directly."

"Well, then, my lord, what think you of a 'bold stroke for a husband' for the heiress?"

"I don't comprehend your meaning; pray explain," said Lord Mervyn.

"That is easily done. Money is the ruling power, and without it, my lord—and a good deal of it, too—a pack of fox-hounds, with the necessary establishment of servants, horses, and numerous other items of expenditure contingent thereon, cannot be long kept up."

"Certainly not; they must cost a very large sum annually."

"Exactly so, my lord; and the Beauchamps are reported to have maintained a hard struggle in supporting their establishment hitherto, which cannot last much longer."

"They are assisted, I am told, by some large subscriptions," observed Lord Mervyn.

"Nothing very great," replied Vernon, "although the exact sum is known only to the secretary, Conyers, who, being a friend of Will Beauchamp's, will not mention the amount; at any rate, all agree it is not half what it ought to be. Well, under these circumstances, an additional ten thousand a year would carry the concern on swimmingly, and enable the Beauchamps to keep it up without any subscription at all."

"Most likely," replied Lord Mervyn. "But where is the ten thousand a year to come from?"

"Miss Douglas, my lord; for people say she is much attached to Beauchamp and his sister."

"Pshaw! nonsense, Vernon! Harcourt will never allow her to marry such a man as Mr. Beauchamp."

"Perhaps not, my lord; but you forget her aunt, Mrs. Gordon, is equally her guardian, and we all know what a favourite Beauchamp is with her."

"But I am told," said Lord Mervyn, "that you are in a fair way of winning the prize yourself."

"No, my lord, my chance is a very poor one; in fact, Mrs. Harcourt gave me to understand, nothing short of a coronet would do for her niece, and hinted at Lord Malcolm, who is expected soon at Throseby Hall; but as he is a very slow coach, neither very handsome nor agreeable, I have been thinking, if your lordship knows of any young, good-looking, fascinating sprig of nobility, with more wits than ready cash, you might do him a good turn, by asking him down, about the time of our county ball, when the heiress makes her *début* in public, and, a hundred to one, he cuts *out* Mr. William Beauchamp, and cuts *off* all further support to the fox-hounds."

"Capital," exclaimed Lord Mervyn, as a sneering smile passed over his cadaverous countenance; "you are quite a diplomatist, Vernon, and I must get you appointed Secretary to one of our Embassies—really a very good idea; but let me consider——"

"What do you say to Lord Vancourt?" inquired Mr. Harper.

"The very man," exclaimed Lord Mervyn. "We owe him a turn of favour (although we did help his father to the peerage) for his staunch adherence to our party; he is just the man—tall, very handsome—with highly polished manners and address, devoted to the ladies; in short, the very person to captivate a young, unsophisticated country girl."

"Then your lordship could invite him down at once, and ask the Harcourts to spend a few days at Marston, before Lord Malcolm arrives. A few walks and rides with Lord Vancourt as her companion, and the many opportunities which will be afforded him, when under the same roof, of paying uninterrupted attention to the young lady, will, I have little doubt, finish the business off-hand, particularly if you play your cards cleverly with old Harcourt, and represent Lord Vancourt as a man of substance, &c."

"It shall be done, Vernon, without delay, and you must come here also to help in playing out the comedy."

"Tragedy, more likely," added Harper, with a laugh, "for Lord Vancourt is as bad-tempered and debauched a fellow as any man about town, and devilish hard up for cash too! I only hope Harcourt won't find him out till after *church time*, that's all. Hah! hah!"

"We will try and exhibit the picture in the best light, shading his imperfections from view as much as possible," said Lord Mervyn. "But Vancourt must strike whilst the iron is hot——" which last sentence was escaping his lordship's lips, when one of the footmen entered the room, with that noiseless step peculiar to London-trained servants, and stood as if awaiting orders.

"What the devil do you stand there for?" demanded Lord Mervyn, in a rage.

"I thought the dining-room bell rang, my lord," replied the man, very gravely.

"No, sir, it did not; and I'll thank you to make sure it does, another time, before you dare present yourself in my presence without being summoned."

The servant bowed low and withdrew, but as he shut the door, a slight curl played for a moment round his upper lip; in the next, the cold, apathetic look resumed its place.

"Hang that fellow!" exclaimed Vernon; "he must have heard your lordship's last remarks."

"What if he did? It was only a common-place observation."

"Well, perhaps not," said Vernon. "I only hope he did not overhear Harper's encomiums on Lord Vancourt."

"Pooh! nonsense, Vernon, that's next to an impossibility," replied his lordship, much chafed at the idea. But it was a possibility, and a fact, too—the man had overheard every word of it—for happening to pass by the dining-room door, in returning from the drawing-room, the name of Beauchamp struck his ear, and knowing his lord's and Vernon's dislike to the young squire (as he was generally termed), he stood, an eager listener, at the door, and heard the whole plot against Miss Douglas; but the butler coming suddenly upon him, obliged him to enter the room to prevent detection in the act of eavesdropping.

Thomas Carter, the first footman, had been born and bred up in the village of Bampton, until fourteen years of age, when he was taken by a friend of Mr. Beauchamp's as the junior domestic in his establishment, from which he rose with his years and inches, until having quarrelled with the butler, he obtained the situation he now held and had occupied for two years in Lord Mervyn's household; retaining still a strong attachment to his native village, and to the young squire, who had shown him great kindness when a boy. He was also connected (though unknown to Lord Mervyn) with old Farmer Rosier, a late tenant on the Marston estates, whose crops having been destroyed, year after year, by the hares and rabbits, without any redress or allowance from his landlord, was at last completely ruined, and all his goods and chattels being distrained upon for rent, which it was impossible for him to pay, he would have been mercilessly turned upon the parish, but for his son, Mark Rosier, who rented a cottage on Mr. Styles's farm, with whom he found constant employment.

Mark was a tall, stout, athletic young man of twenty-two, active as a tiger and bold as a lion—yet, withal, of a kind disposition; but his father's injuries, and the injustice he had experienced from Lord Mervyn, rankled in his breast, and he determined to take his revenge on the game, which had been the cause of his father's ruin. In fact, Mark Rosier had now become, from his courage and knowledge of wood-craft, the leader of a daring gang of poachers, who preyed almost exclusively on Lord Mervyn's preserves, for he was universally disliked by all classes (the poor especially) for his haughty, overbearing character.

Mark's gang consisted of six young fellows, besides himself, who were bound together by an oath, never, in any emergency, to split upon each other, and one of their rules was never to sit drinking in any public-house. The booty was fairly divided amongst them, being sent up to London by a night coach, the guard of which was well paid for his trouble. Instead of common powder and shot, air-guns, with a single ball, were their only weapons, by which the pheasants were noiselessly knocked off their perches; the most windy and boisterous nights being always selected for their depredations.

From this digression we must return to Marston Castle, where Lord Mervyn, Vernon, and Harper, having completed their plot for the destruction of Miss Douglas's happiness for life, by uniting her to Lord Vancourt, an adjournment was made to the drawing-room, where sat Lady Mervyn, in regal state, with her only daughter, a timid, child-like girl of about sixteen, who scarcely dared to open her lips in her mother's presence. As Vernon gazed on her pale, interesting features and downcast eyes, a sudden thought passed through his mind, and he sat down by her side, with the hope of drawing her into conversation. But the stolen glance towards her father and mother, with her monosyllabic replies to his questions, revealed to him the tyranny under which she suffered. Still she appeared pleased with his attentions, and ventured on a quiet smile at some of his witty remarks. "Do you sing, Miss Mervyn?" he asked.

"No," was the reply. "Mamma says my voice is not sufficiently cultivated to sing in company."

"Do you play, then?"

"Yes, when mamma desires me."

"Does Lady Mervyn allow you ever to walk by yourself, without one of those tall footmen behind you?"

"Only in the morning, before breakfast."

Vernon was proceeding to other questions, when Lady Mervyn called him away. But knowing that Miss Mervyn had been left by her grandmother thirty thousand pounds, which would be her own, when she should marry, or become of age, without any restriction, he had mentally resolved on appropriating the young lady and her money to himself, as every prospect of obtaining the heiress was at an end. How he succeeded will hereafter be shown; and we now take our leave of the inmates of Marston Castle for the night.

CHAPTER VIII.

On the following morning a dispatch was addressed to Lord Vancourt, at his father's seat in Bedfordshire, with a pressing invitation from Lord Mervyn; and in the postscript, a hint about the heiress with ten thousand a year; to which an answer was quickly returned by Lord Vancourt, naming Monday week for his visit to Marston Castle.

The intelligence of the new visitor's expected arrival, on the day appointed, soon spread through the household; and Thomas Carter, the footman, having obtained leave of absence for an hour or two, one afternoon, sent a message, by a trusty friend, to Mark Rosier, to meet him in a by-road near the village. Mark was true to his appointment, and shaking hands with Thomas, inquired why he wished so particularly to see him.

"You shall soon hear what I want you for, Mark, but let us go across the field to that cow-house yonder. We may be seen here together by some of my lord's men; and you are no favourite, you know."

"There's no love lost between us," said Mark.

Having looked well all round the cow-house, Thomas began—

"There's a plot hatched up at the Castle, between my lord and Vernon, to bring down a young scamp, called Lord Vancourt, to cut out the young squire with Miss Douglas; for people do say that the young lady is very partial to Mr. William. So, my lord and Vernon is desperately afraid she'll marry him, and her money help to keep on the hounds, as the old squire is hard up."

"'Tis a lie, Tom! The ould squire ain't hard up, but as sound in the pocket as ever that sallow-faced lord is."

"Well, Mark, that's what Vernon said."

"He's a liar, then—but now, let us hear what I can do in this business; for sooner than any one of that old rascal's friends should marry that young lady, I'll put one of my *silent* bullets through his heart,—that's what I'll do for him, Tom."

"No, you won't; we can do without it."

"I tell you what it is, Tom. The old squire sent for father t'other day, and asked him all about his being turned out of the farm by my lord up there. 'Never mind, Rosier,' says he, 'you are a hardly-used man, and as Giles leaves his holding, at

Lady-day, for a larger farm, you shall have it then, so make your mind easy, and here's a ten-pound note to help you to get a few things together now.' 'Oh, squire,' said father, 'I be thankful, very thankful, for your kindness to an old, broken-down man; but where be I to find stock for five acres, much more for a hundred and fifty?' 'You'll find it all there, Rosier, ready for you—sheep, cows, pigs, and horses—for which you can pay me when you are able, and not before.' 'Oh, squire,' said father, falling down on his knees, and crying like a child, 'I can't thank'e, sir, as I ought, my heart's too full.' 'Get up,' said Mr. Beauchamp, 'you blubbering old fool, or I'll horsewhip thee; and now, go along to the housekeeper's room, and harkee, tell Mark Will wants to see him.' There, Tom, that's the old squire, and I'll go through fire and water to serve him or any dear to him."

"And quite right, too, Mark," replied Tom; "but here's no fighting to be done now; and if you won't listen to reason, and be quiet, I'll say no more."

"Say on, then."

"First, you'll promise to keep it all snug, and tell the young squire to mind what he's about, too, or the whole thing will be blow'd at once, and I shall get the sack."

"Well, Tom, you may trust both of us that nothing shall come out; mum's the word. Now to business."

"Then you go over to Bampton, Mark, and tell Mr. William that this young scamp is coming down to the Castle, and old Harcourt and the young lady are to be asked over to meet him, and stay a few days, whilst my lord is to gammon the old gentleman about Lord Vancourt being a capital match for his ward, rich, good character, and all that kind of thing; and the young lord is to gammon the heiress, as he's deuced handsome, and has got the gift of the gab. So tell Mr. William to let his sister see Miss Douglas afore she goes to Marston, and warn her of the trap that's so nicely baited to catch her in; that's all, Mark, for young girls is always took with fine, tall, smart men, like you and me, Mark; and, by all accounts, Lord Vancourt is all that, with a pretty deal more to boot. And if Miss Constance don't go over directly, and put Miss Blanche up to the trick, it's ten to one she's snapped up at once; and, by all accounts, she'd better be buried than married to such a young rascal as this is. That's all Mark, so good-bye, and I'll let you know more about him when he comes down."

Mark did not lose much time in going over to Bampton the same evening, waiting in the servants' hall until dinner was removed, and the ladies had left the dining-room, when the butler whispered in his young master's ear, "Mark Rosier is waiting to see you, sir."

Beauchamp rose at once, and, leaving the room, went to the servants' hall.

"Well, Mark, what's in the wind now?"

"Something, sir," replied Mark, in a low tone, "for your ear alone."

"Oh, very well; then follow me to the library."

When the door was closed, Mark placed his ear to the keyhole, for a second or two, to listen. "Ah," said Beauchamp, "there's something particular to-night. What is it, Mark? but our men don't practise that trick, eaves-dropping; found some more traps set, I suppose, by those rascally Marston keepers?"

"Worse than that, sir," replied Mark. "I've caught Lord Mervyn himself setting traps—not for foxes, sir, but for a young lady."

"Ah! indeed; what young lady?"

Mark then related the whole story he had heard from Thomas Carter, during which Beauchamp sat listening in breathless silence, his varying colour and contracted brow betraying his inward emotion. When he had finished, Mark inquired, "Well, sir, isn't that a deep and rascally trick? It beats poaching all to nothing."

"It's a dark, damnable plot, Mark," replied Beauchamp; "but a delicate business for me to handle, in warning the young lady of her danger; she may think it only a trick of mine, to prevent her marrying this young lord, and women are very suspicious in such matters."

"Very true, sir, but Miss Constance must do it, not you."

"Even with her, Mark, it is very ticklish ground to enter upon."

"Then, sir, I'll settle it for you at once, by putting a bullet through that scamp's head, before ever he enters Marston Castle."

"Hush! Mark," said Beauchamp, rising from his chair; "no man's blood shall be shed on my account."

"Many a man's blood has been shed for a much less offence than this, sir. What is robbery on the highway to trapping and plundering a young lady of all her property, in this barefaced manner? that's what I want to know."

"One is contrary to law, the other is not, Mark."

"Ay, ay, sir, law—there it is—law and lawyers—cheating, robbing, murdering, may all be done *under* the law, but not *against* it."

"Well, we can't mend it, Mark."

"No, but this I'll mend so far, begging your pardon. I'll shoot that young scamp of a lord, and the old un into the bargain, before he shall ever carry off that dear, sweet young lady, Miss Blanche. So, squire, if you and Miss Constance won't save her from such a pit-fall as this, I will, sir, that's all, if I swing for it."

"No, Mark, this shall never be. Remember the commandment, 'Thou shalt do no murder.' This young lord has a right to try his chance, as well as others. We may expose his and Lord Mervyn's attempts to sail under false colours, and make Miss Douglas the dupe of their dark design; that is all we have a right to do. I and my sister must consider in what way to make the disclosure."

"It must be done at once, sir; mind, the trap is set already, and wants watching night and day. I and Thomas sha'n't have much to do with sleep, I'm thinking, when he comes down, and I hope *you* won't, sir; so good night, squire. You'll see me again shortly; but I mustn't keep you from your company any longer now."

"Then go and get some supper, Mark, and keep a still tongue on this matter."

"No fear of that, sir;" with which they parted.

On Beauchamp's return to the dining-room, he was asked by his father the name of his visitor. "Mark Rosier," was the reply.

"Ah! a little more trickery a-foot, I suppose, Will."

"Just so, but nothing particularly interesting to our friends here."

The hint was sufficient to prevent further questions, although Conyers, who was of the party, resolved to know more about it; and when they left the dining-room, taking Beauchamp aside, he asked—

"What had Mark to tell you, Will? you have been thoughtful and absent ever since. What's the matter?"

"Something has annoyed me, Bob, that is all."

"Then if you consider me your friend, Beauchamp, let me share your annoyances and your pleasures equally—your secret shall be safe with me."

"You are entitled to my confidence," said Beauchamp, "and in this matter particularly, where you have also an interest, but it must not pass your lips." He then related Mark's story.

"Ah, that scoundrel Vernon," exclaimed Bob; "revenge is sweet. I see it all, and must sleep here to-night, that you and I may talk over this business in the morning, and take Constance into our counsels. Women are quicker in such cases than men, so no more now on this subject."

The next morning, Constance was admitted to the conference on Lord Mervyn's plot; and although expressing herself quite willing to warn her friend of her danger, her opinion was, that Blanche might probably consider her interference in an equivocal light, and savouring perhaps of interested motives.

"You are right, Con," said Bob, "and this warning will come better from me; I will bring it about, somehow or other, so that neither you, your brother, nor Mark, can be compromised, as I am acquainted with a young fellow, belonging to Lord Vancourt's club in London, who knows him tolerably well, and from whom I can obtain all the information we require, as to his fortune, character, &c. &c.; for the rest, trust the brains of an old fox-hunter to checkmate these crafty lords at their game of gammon. The Harcourts are all invited to Compton's on Friday next, the day before our fixture there, when I hear there is to be a little dance in the evening; but don't either you or Will even allude to such a person as Lord Vancourt."

We must now pass over a few days, until the evening of Friday, in the ensuing week, when, about half-past nine, all the principal families in the neighbourhood were assembled in the grand saloon at Mr. Compton's house, which had been tastefully arranged as a ball-room for this occasion. Among the company, Conyers recognised, much to his surprise, Captain Melville, to whom he had written a few days previously about Lord Vancourt.

"Ah! Melville," exclaimed Conyers, "what brings you into this part of the world?"

"Why, to tell you the truth, old fellow, and I don't think you'll blab, it is a little bit of speculation. Colonel Rolleston wrote me word, there was a young heiress coming out down here, and if I liked to try my luck, he would do what he could to help me. So here I am, staying with Rolleston; and if the young lady is good-looking, as well as rich, I should not mind becoming a Benedict; but you know I cannot marry without money, although I would never tie myself to a plain, disagreeable woman, were she as rich as Crœsus."

"Well," said Conyers, "there is something more manly in that confession than we meet with in most fortune-hunters; but you will find more impediments to your suit than you imagine, as her guardian, Mr. Harcourt, who is here to-night, has set his mind on having a coronet for his ward, in the person of her cousin, expected down every day."

"That is bad news, indeed, Bob; but still I'll have a trial for her, if she suits my fancy."

"By-the-bye, Melville, have you seen anything of Lord Vancourt lately?"

"Not since the season closed in town, and I don't wish to see any more of him."

"Why so?"

"Because he is an ill-tempered, imperious fellow, disliked by every man in the club, and a confounded blackguard also."

"Indeed," said Conyers, affecting surprise.

"He is as poor as a church mouse, gambles and cheats at cards, like the devil, to keep up appearances, and keeps an Italian singer, to whom, report says, he is completely committed, or positively married, so that he cannot get rid of her. In fact, he has tried to palm her off on some of his friends, but the woman won't budge, and sticks to him like a leech."

"Egad! I did not expect to hear all this of Lord Vancourt; for a friend of mine asked me something about him, a short time ago, and I wrote to you, the other day, to inquire if you knew him."

"Too well," replied Melville; "but your letter was, I conclude, directed to my club, and has not reached me; and now, Bob, show me the heiress."

"There she is, dressed in white, with pearls twisted in her hair, leaning on her aunt's arm, at the upper end of the room."

"What, that rather tall beautiful girl, now speaking to Mrs. Rolleston?"

"The same, Melville."

'Then, by Jove! she is, to my mind, the prettiest woman in the room, and I am off for an introduction."

In a few minutes after, Melville was presented by Mrs. Rolleston to Mrs. Harcourt and her niece; and his first words were addressed to the latter, requesting the honour of dancing with her. "I believe," replied Blanche, "that I am already engaged for every dance this evening." When Melville, disconcerted at this unexpected damper to his highly wrought expectations, bowed and withdrew, as Beauchamp, who had dined that evening at Compton's and bespoke the first quadrille, approached and offered his arm.

The heiress being the great attraction of the evening, many inquisitive, and many more envious glances were directed towards her and her partner, to scan every look and gesture of each; but both were too much occupied with their own thoughts to think of others. Beauchamp's gentlemanly, quiet attentions, with his peculiarly happy and cheerful smile, and Blanche's radiant looks, were noticed by Melville's quick eye, who inquired of Conyers the name of her partner.

"Beauchamp," was the reply, "our young Master of Foxhounds; but why do you ask, Melville?"

"There's something so frank and manly in that fellow's face, with such quiet, kind manners, that any girl might fall in love with him; and I'll bet a cool hundred, by her behaviour, the heiress is booked already."

"Oh, nonsense," replied Conyers; "Will Beauchamp is one of the kindest-hearted fellows in the world, and has known Miss Douglas many years, but he is no fortune-hunter."

"Perhaps not," replied Melville; "but that girl thinks more of him than you suppose."

"Not that, I'll engage; but now I will introduce you to Miss Markham, the wittiest, if not the prettiest girl in the room."

There was a very large conservatory at one end of the saloon, the doors of which were thrown open to afford a promenade to the dancers after their exertions, flower-stands occupying the centre, with a wide walk round, and seats were disposed at the lower end under magnificent orange trees. To this Elysian retreat Beauchamp conducted his partner when the dance was over; and standing by her side, under the orange tree, examining the buds and young oranges, he alluded to their last meeting in Aunt Gordon's conservatory, which called the crimson blush to her cheek.

"Tell me, dear Blanche," he said, "have you quite forgiven my presumption on that occasion?"

"Oh! yes, were it needed, your pardon has been long ago assured."

"Then, will you accept and wear this little trinket, which may sometimes remind you of my undying regard, when we may be separated for ever?"

"Do not say that, William, for I trust such will never be the case."

"Oh, that your words may be realised," he replied; "but will you accept my little offering, a basket of flowers?" as he placed the trinket in her hand.

"Oh, William! what a pretty little ornament! intended for a brooch, I suppose?"

"Yes, dear Blanche, the design was my own; the flowers in stones, emblematical of those feelings I shall ever entertain towards you. Will you keep it, and wear it for my sake?"

"Yes, indeed I will, William, though I require no such remembrancer of my regard for you."

"Thanks, dearest Blanche, for that admission, which I shall treasure up in the deepest recesses of my heart; but I must now lose your too dearly-prized society, as Captain Markham is approaching to claim your hand—that dear little hand" he added in a low tone, "which I would give worlds to call my own!"

Blanche blushed deeply, casting her eyes on the ground; but the Captain's near advance prevented her making any reply.

"Shall I keep the brooch for you, dear Blanche," he whispered, "until the ball is over?"

"Oh, yes," she replied, "pray do."

"The last dance, remember," he added, "you have promised me."

"I shall not forget it, William," looking in his face with an expression that made Beauchamp's heart throb and beat most joyfully, as she turned to accept the Captain's arm.

"Eh? pon honour, Miss Douglas," exclaimed Markham, "I have been searching for you in every corner; couldn't think where you had gone; the quadrille has begun already; but really this is a delightful place, don't wonder at your loitering here, with Will Beauchamp, too—giving you an account of his last run, I suppose: good sort of fellow enough, but a little too fond of hunting—not quite a ladies' man, eh! Miss Douglas?"

"No," she replied, gaily, "if by a ladies' man you mean one who is always making fine, flattering speeches, and paying compliments he does not feel."

"Eh?—no—not exactly; a true ladies' man devotes himself entirely to the fair sex, lives and exists only in their smiles."

"Then he must be, by your account, quite an ethereal being, and never thinks of eating supper at a ball, I conclude."

"Really, Miss Douglas, that is going a little too far, for, by Gad, I feel very peckish to-night, and intend doing ample justice to Compton's good things at one o'clock. But, demmit—I beg pardon, Miss Douglas—our place is occupied as *vis-à-vis* to that fallow Vernon and his partner, who promised to keep it open. What shall we do?—Gad! I have it—ask that good-tempered Beauchamp to find a partner, and then we can cut in somewhere."

This arrangement was soon made, much to Beauchamp's delight, who had again an opportunity of holding that hand in his, whose pressure told as much as words could explain. The evening passed pleasantly away with a succession of dances, for every one of which Miss Douglas had been speedily engaged on her first entering the room, until the hour of supper, when Bob Conyers handed her into the room; and Beauchamp politely offering his arm to Mrs. Harcourt, it was graciously accepted. The friendly terms on which Beauchamp seemed to be with that lady called forth the sarcastic sneers of Vernon, who sat nearly opposite to them with one of the Miss Rollestons.

"Ah!" he said, "Beauchamp is trying to utter soft things to the old lady aunt, as well as the heiress, to-night; but the quarry is too high game for his arrows to reach."

"I think," remarked Miss Rolleston, "William Beauchamp has much to recommend him, were he to think seriously of Miss Douglas."

"Nothing that I know of," replied Vernon, "except a good voice with hounds and a tolerable seat on horseback, which any groom might possess."

"For shame, Mr. Vernon, to speak in such terms of one who is so universally admitted to be a perfect gentleman in manners and feelings; but I know Miss Douglas was a great favourite of yours once, and now, I suppose, the grapes are sour."

"The grapes are not to be plucked by plebeian hands," retorted Vernon, "therefore could never fall to my gathering or his, which that fool Beauchamp will soon find to his cost also."

"Miss Douglas is free to choose whom she pleases, I suppose," observed Miss Rolleston, "at least, when she comes of age; and if she will take my advice, she will marry the man of her own choice, not her guardian's."

"A coronet studded with gems is a very pretty attractive toy to a young, artless girl," said Vernon.

"But not to a sensible one," added Miss Rolleston.

"Oh, of course not; but there are not many such sensible young ladies as Miss Rolleston, who would refuse the glittering bauble when offered to them; and I suspect, after all, Miss Douglas will not decline to be made a peeress when the proposal is made."

"What proposal, Mr. Vernon?"

"Oh," replied he, carelessly, "her cousin Malcolm is named for one, and other poor devils of our grand noblesse will, no doubt, put in a bidding, when she is trotted out for sale to the highest bidder, with old Harcourt as auctioneer."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mr. Vernon," replied Miss Rolleston, indignantly, "to speak in such disrespectful terms of that sweet girl, whose greatest misfortune may be that she is an heiress."

A move was now made from the supper-table, and the last on the list being a country dance, Beauchamp claimed Blanche's promise, and they were soon engaged with hands across, down the middle, up again, until she was nearly exhausted with this incessant work. "Come, dear Blanche," he whispered, "this is too much for you, who have been dancing all night. I will not allow you to go on longer, or you will be quite laid up to-morrow. Take my arm, and we will walk about until you are cooler; for I heard Mrs. Harcourt say the carriage was ordered exactly at three, and it is now within a quarter of the time." Beauchamp was leading her to the conservatory again, when she said—

"Not there, William; my aunt will be angry if she cannot find us when the carriage arrives."

"One turn only, dear Blanche, to give up my little present to your keeping; but do not tremble or fear me, dearest; the word you apprehend shall not escape my lips again this night."

When they had reached the upper end, near the orange-trees, Beauchamp, taking Blanche's pocket-handkerchief, tied the little jewel-case in one corner of it, and returned it to her without another word or comment. "And now, dear Blanche, we will attend upon your aunt, and I shall send Constance to-morrow to see how you are, as I must be out hunting."

In a few moments the carriage was announced, and the company began rapidly to disperse.

And now what are we to say of all William Beauchamp's good resolutions, which had been scattered to the winds? and his firm determination not to make Blanche Douglas acquainted with the feelings of his heart until she had mixed more in the world? All had been over-ruled by the dread of her falling into the trap set for her by Lord Mervyn and Vernon. His love, long pent up within his own breast, was now suddenly called forth by the horror of losing her for ever, and her being wedded to such a fate as that designed by these unprincipled plotters against her fortune and happiness. The heiress ceased to be remembered as the heiress; Beauchamp thought only of that dear, pure-minded girl whose image had been so long entwined about his heart. "She ought at least to know," argued he, "that there is one who loves her dearer than his own life, and would support her through every trial." And he argued still more plausibly to himself that the confession of his love could be no barrier to her selection of any other person more congenial to her taste. This, of course, it would not have been, had Blanche been free of herself to choose; but, fortunately or unfortunately, Beauchamp's expression of love had struck a respondent chord in her heart, which vibrated through her whole frame.

On the night of Sir Lionel Markham's dinner-party, Blanche had experienced certain inexplicable sensations towards William Beauchamp, which were redoubled on their meeting at the Priory a few days after; and she now felt, after carefully analysing her feelings, that she loved him dearly, intensely—and oh! the delight of that night's revelation—that she was beloved in return! Blanche Douglas had received the blessing of a sound religious education from a lady of good family, who had resided many years with her pupil, and who faithfully discharged her duty to her youthful charge by firmly impressing on her mind those high principles of religion and morality, which would prove her greatest comfort and protection during the trials and temptations which she would most probably be exposed to in after life. Mrs. Barratt loved Blanche as her own daughter; and bitter, indeed, was the parting between governess and pupil, when the kind-hearted woman left Throseby, a few months previously, her services being no longer required by Mrs. Harcourt.

"Dear, kind Mrs. Barratt," exclaimed Blanche, sobbing and crying at her departure, "you must promise to come and live with me, when I am married, or become mistress of my own property—indeed you must. I shall never be happy without you."

"My dear child," replied Mrs. Barratt, "you know little now of the duties and trials of married life; your husband would never consent to such an arrangement as you propose, and it would then be your duty to conform to his wishes—I would not say commands—as every wife should obey her husband."

"Then, dear Mrs. Barratt, I will never marry till I can find one who will love me for myself alone, and love all those I love —kind-hearted and affectionate like yourself—who will yield to all my reasonable desires, and endeavour to make me, as I should him, truly happy."

"Marriage is a great lottery, dear Blanche, and I would earnestly caution you against accepting any man, however handsome or agreeable—however rich, or talented, or titled—unless you have an opportunity of thoroughly ascertaining his true character. 'Never marry in haste, and repent at leisure.' Your large fortune will attract many pretended admirers, men of the world, to whom love, in its true meaning, is utterly unknown; and when once in possession of your fortune, they might treat you with indifference and neglect. Indeed, my dear, dear child, a young girl with a large fortune stands in a much worse position, in regard to her prospects of happiness in the married state, than one who has nothing beyond her own mental and personal attractions. Among all your neighbours, there is not any gentleman I know in the least degree calculated to make you happy, except one, and he, I fear, is too high-minded and fastidious in his ideas about money, ever to aspire to the hand of the heiress; that person, my dear child, is William Beauchamp. He is fond of hunting, because it is a bold, manly amusement, in many respects resembling war; and had he adopted the army as a profession, the name of William Beauchamp would have stood conspicuous in his country's defence. With the most chivalrous feelings of honour, a deep sense of religion, a firm and unshaken resolution, and one of the most kind and loving hearts that ever beat in human breast, the woman who shall marry William Beauchamp will draw a prize indeed."

"Dear Mrs. Barratt," replied Blanche, "I believe William to be all you represent him, and you know I consider him and Constance as my brother and sister."

"Yes, dear child, glad am I to leave you with two such friends, to whom I can safely entrust your happiness; prize them, love them, dearest Blanche, as I know they love you, and never keep a secret from your sister Constance, who will ever direct and guide you in the path of duty and religion;

and now farewell, my own long-loved, dearest child, and may Heaven protect you from every evil, and that greatest of all evils, a bad husband," when, straining her to her breast once more, Mrs. Barratt rushed from the room, and poor Blanche sank helpless in her chair, convulsed with sobs and sorrow, where she sat crying until her maid Alice entered, and exerted all her entreaties and kind offices to soothe and comfort her almost broken-hearted young lady.

"Oh, my dear mistress," cried Alice, kneeling at her feet, "pray do not give way thus" (at the same time wiping with her apron the tears trickling down her own cheeks). "Poor, dear, kind Mrs. Barratt, we shall all miss her so," and she began sobbing herself as if her heart would break. "Oh, Miss Blanche, this will be a sad day—but there, I declare, is Mrs. Harcourt's step coming this way," which roused the two young girls to check their emotions.

"Why, Blanche," exclaimed Mrs. Harcourt, witnessing the traces of her grief, "I thought you possessed too high a sense of decorum to give way to such sobs and lamentations, and in the presence of your servant; indeed, you ought to rejoice at Mrs. Barratt's good fortune, in having, through your Aunt Gordon's recommendation, obtained such a desirable situation as companion to old Mrs. Dacre, where she will have nothing whatever to do."

"I cannot, dear aunt," replied Blanche, still sobbing, "refrain from grieving at the loss I have sustained in dear Mrs. Barratt, who has ever been to me a second mother; but if you will leave me, I will endeavour to be more composed."

"Well, my dear, make haste, and wash away all traces of your tears, for I expect some visitors this morning, and you must be in the drawing-room to help me to receive them."

Mrs. Harcourt was one of those cold, unapproachable beings, living within the frigid zone, repellent alike, and impervious to every genial influence; in fact, she belonged to that numerous class denominated *the imperturbables*, who consider it a breach of decorum to be affected by those common occurrences which exercise so foolish an influence over the generality of the human race. Excess of grief for the loss of friends and relations, or excess of joy at their recovery, in her ideas, betrayed a weakness of mind in those who could indulge in such wayward fancies, and decidedly at variance with the rules of propriety and etiquette to be observed, without exception, upon all occasions. She was one of those persons who would, if engaged in the

Satanical pastime of table-turning and table-rapping, have stood as a six-foot-thick wall to prevent any rotatory motion of the said table towards herself, possessing not one atom of electricity in her whole composition.

Blanche Douglas, it need scarcely be said, unfortunately for her own peace of mind and individual happiness, was a native of the torrid zone, and therefore the very opposite in disposition and character to Mrs. Harcourt. Like the young offshoot of a vine, stretching forth its tender and pliant tendrils for support, this young, warm-hearted girl (when bereft of the mainstay of her childhood, in the person of Mrs. Barratt) looked around for one to whom she could cling for comfort and sympathy in her feelings, and love with the intensity of her deep and abiding attachment. In Constance she had found a firm and warm friend, to whom, as a sister, she could communicate all her joys and sorrows; but her feelings towards William Beauchamp had become almost unintelligible to herself for some time past, Mrs. Barratt's remarks occasioning a shyness and embarrassment in her manner towards him, not before experienced, when viewing him (which she had from an early age) as her brother only. The veil was now withdrawn—she knew that she loved, with the ardour of her first purest affections, him to whom she could cling through life, as women only can and do cling to the husband of their choice.

On retreating to her room after her return from Mrs. Compton's ball, Blanche carefully examined her pretty little basket of flowers (Beauchamp's present), and every word and look of his were recalled to her mind, as, pressing it to her lips, she imprinted a fond kiss upon its glittering surface.

"Yes, dear William," she exclaimed, "I will indeed treasure this little trinket for your sake, although you are seldom absent from my thoughts, and your love to me is far beyond all earthly treasures."

CHAPTER IX.

The breakfast at Mr. Compton's, after the ball, presented a striking contrast to that of Marston Castle. All faces beamed with happy smiles and joyous good humour, induced by the kind reception they experienced from the master and mistress of Brockley House, who welcomed friends and strangers alike to partake of their hospitality. Opposite to the breakfast-room windows on the lawn were congregated about three hundred pheasants, called together by the keeper's whistle, and enjoying their breakfast also.

"Ah!" remarked Mrs. Compton, playfully to Bob Conyers, whose eyes were riveted on the game, "I judge what your feelings are in witnessing this formidable array of your enemies; but come, I will make you a bet of five shillings that there is one of your friends lurking in that bed of laurels, not twenty yards from the spot where the pheasants are now feeding."

"Thank you, my dear madam, for your kind offer of relieving my pockets of its contents, which may possibly amount to the sum you have named, and which I should most certainly lose, were I rash enough to accept such a wager. As we are all well aware of your and Mr. Compton's liberality in catering for your friends in pink jackets, there is no person to whom I could hand over five shillings with less reluctance than to yourself; but as my purse is not on any day of the week inconveniently burdened with the coin of the realm, and on hunting days contains only sufficient for the contingencies which may occur, such as a feed of corn and a bucket of gruel for my horse, probably a lost shoe or two, and a glass of brandy and water for myself, with a few little extras for ostler and turnpikes on my road to and from hunting, I could not venture on such a hazard as an even bet, although I would not refuse four to one, which I think are the fair odds against a fox being found in the bed of laurels."

"There, Mr. Conyers, look there," cried a little girl, running up to him, "there is a fox just peeping out from the laurels."

"By Jove, my darling!" exclaimed Bob, taking the child up in his arms and kissing her, "you have just saved me from losing a shilling to your mamma, which, by the way, I dare say, is very provoking to her; but to pacify her anger, you may whisper to her that Bob's *annual*, on Christmas Day, will make some amends for her disappointment."

"Tell me what *my* present is to be," said the child.

"No, my dear, you must wait patiently till the basket arrives."

"Really, Mr. Conyers," exclaimed Mrs. Compton, "it is very provoking to see how you spoil my children; they are quite unmanageable when you are here, and I really think I must forbid you the house, or they will be entirely ruined."

"If indulgence is to cause this," returned Bob, "I think their mamma will have much more to answer for than Bob Conyers."

"Well, Mr. Conyers, we are all now impatient to begin our day's sport, which we can see from the terrace; so give a hint to William Beauchamp, or these increasing new comers will soon clear off our stock of old cherry brandy."

"Thank you for the hint," replied Conyers, "as I have not yet had my glass of jumping powder."

The hounds having arrived, Mr. Compton's guests quickly dispersed in search of their steeds; the lion of the day, on whom all eyes were turned, being a great Leicestershire squire, who had for many years hunted that country with a splendid pack of fox-hounds, but was now settled down on his own patrimonial estates. It being one of his maxims, that every fence was practicable with a fall, it is almost needless to say, he was a bold and fearless rider, and that no obstacle ever stopped him. In stature, he was about the general standard, with a broad, expansive chest, and features, if not handsome, yet manly, reflecting the spirit, which was working within, of cool determination and undaunted courage. His seat on horseback was neither studied nor graceful, but easy and careless as his manner of riding across country, to which may be attributed many of the severe falls he encountered, which were of such continued occurrence, that he never appeared quite satisfied without his general allowance of half-a-dozen per diem.

"Oh, demmit!" exclaimed Markham, who had been listening to a recital of the great squire's exploits, retailed by Vernon, "what a confounded fire-eating monster he looks! he'll pound us all to-day, and ride away from Burnett and Beauchamp too."

"I hope so," replied Vernon, "and that both of them may break their necks in trying to catch him."

"Eh! indeed, Dick, you're a nice member of the hunt, aint you, to wish every man of us to be beaten by a stranger? but

I'll bet you an even five pounds he don't beat Will Beauchamp or Burnett."

"Done, Markham, and I'll make it ten, if you like."

"Take him at his word," cried Sir Lucius Gwynne, who overheard the conversation, "and I'll go halves with you."

"Done, then, Vernon," exclaimed the Captain; "Gwynne's witness to the bet."

"And now," said Sir Lucius, "I'll bet you two to one on Beauchamp against the great Leicestershire man. Will you have it, Vernon?"

"No, I thank you," was the reply; "I shall take no more on that event to-day; but who is to decide?"

"We will have Burnett," said Gwynne; "you can choose Tyler, or any other first-flight man you prefer to him."

All being now mounted and ready for action, the hounds were thrown into the evergreens near the house, and in a moment the fox broke across the lawn. Dashing through the stable-yard below and some out-buildings, which screened him from view, he immediately sank into the vale, taking his line through the most formidable fences of the whole country. Will Beauchamp and his whipper-in Charley were with the hounds, as usual, but had not crossed more than three fields before the great hero was down upon them, at full speed, and going at a small brook as if a river were in his way.

"He'll catch it there," cried Charley to his master, as the great squire and his horse went floundering into the stream. "I should have thought, sir, a man of his business habits had know'd what boggy ground meant afore to-day; but come along, sir, there's plenty to help him out;" and, sooth to say, there were about a dozen of the "finest fellows in the world" in the same predicament, with their horses up to their hocks, struggling in the mire. Sir Francis, however, had the sense to avoid the trap, and followed in the track of Will Beauchamp, who, with Charley, kept the lead with the hounds, until they ran into their fox, in an open grass field, after a burst of thirty-five minutes, without a check. Sir Francis, Tyler, Gwynne, and Fred Beauchamp were the four next up, and close behind them came the lion of the day, hot and furious.

"Confound that bog!" he exclaimed; "it spoiled my start completely, and you know, Burnett, five minutes lost are hard to recover in a quick thing like this; but I'll take care the hounds don't get out of my sight with our second fox."

"Don't make too sure of that," replied Sir Francis; "we are not in Leicestershire now, but one of the stiffest vales I ever crossed yet, where hounds can and will beat the horses."

"They can't beat me," replied the great squire.

"They have done it once already, and will do it again, I hope," rejoined Burnett; "that is, if the scent holds as good with the next fox we find."

By this time the Captain and Vernon had reached the spot, when the former appealed to Gwynne about his bet.

"You have won this heat clearly enough, Markham," replied Sir Lucius, "as Beauchamp had his fox in hand five minutes at least before the great man showed at all, and four of us were before him."

"Eh! Vernon, 'pon honour, no mistake about it—lost your money, old fellow; but come, I'll let you off for a five pound note—demmed liberal offer, eh?"

"I won't take it, Markham, for I feel certain of winning, as an accident only prevented my man being in his proper place, where he is sure to be the next run."

"Oh, very well," replied the Captain; "as you please."

The hounds were now taken to one of the finest fox coverts in the world—a large hazel coppice of about one hundred acres, situated in the centre of a fine grass country, with large, open pasture fields.

"Ah!" exclaimed the Leicestershire squire, "this is something like a hunting country, with plenty of room to fall, without half a score fellows being in upon a man when he's down. Now, Burnett, we may fancy ourselves at Billesdon again."

"With this difference only," replied Sir Francis, "that there we can take our fences at a fly; here it cannot be done, with a wide ditch on both sides, and a big, thundering bank and quickset in the middle."

"I shall try it, notwithstanding," rejoined the squire.

"Then you don't see our second fox killed, that's settled; but, hark! by Jove! they have found him." And with a scream, which thrilled through the hearts of all, Will Beauchamp viewed him over the ride. In a moment the whole pack was at work, rattling him round the covert.

"Beautiful!" exclaimed the great squire: "how those big brutes stick to him! Gad, sir, they squeak like terriers, light enough in their tongue—eh, Burnett?"

"Yes, there's little cry with them, and when they run hard, you can scarcely hear them at all; tip and go is their motto, and I've seen them run half a mile with their fox in view, without a hound giving tongue. But, look! they are away at the bottom of the covert, while we are standing here."

"Now for it, then," cried Sir Francis, as, sticking his spurs into his horse, he dashed down the nearest drive; but Beauchamp, with his whip Charley, had got the start, and kept the lead for three miles of very severe country, until the hounds were brought to a check on the banks of a deep brook, where the fox, having been headed by a man at work in the field opposite, had doubled back, and thrown them into some little confusion. At this moment the Leicestershire squire made his *entrée* into the field, in rather an unceremonious manner, by being thrown head foremost from his saddle over a high bank, with his horse scrambling after him. Beauchamp, hearing the crash behind him, turned and asked if he was hurt.

"Hurt!" he exclaimed; "no, *I* am not often hurt by a fall; but now we are even, sir," addressing Beauchamp, as the hounds settled again on the scent; "so come along:" and he rode savagely at the brook, cheering Beauchamp to follow. Our young master, with Charley, were quickly by his side, when the great man, thinking to pound them, rode at some stiff post and rails against the hill, which his horse, having the wind knocked out of him already, was unable to clear, and, breaking the top rail, again gave his master a severe fall.

"Thank you," said Beauchamp, as he passed the prostrate squire, "for letting me over so easy."

"I am not beaten yet," was the retort, as he once more jumped into his saddle; and, rendered furious by the fall, he rode desperately at a new five-barred gate, over which he fell heavily into a hard turnpike road, his horse also lying stunned on his back.

"Now, sir," said Beauchamp, jumping from his saddle, "you are hurt, or ought to be; pray let me assist you."

"Oh, never mind me," faintly ejaculated the squire; "this is deuced hard falling ground; but confound that rascally groom of mine, for mounting me on a horse not fit to go. I'll discharge him this very night. Thank you, Mr. Beauchamp, for your attention. I am all right again now; pray go on with your hounds. I will soon be with you."

Bob Conyers and others now coming up, Beauchamp whispered to him a few words about the great man's fall, and rode away to catch his hounds, which, by the way, he never could, until, with Charley alone, they had killed their second fox among the laurels on Mr. Compton's lawn, on the very spot where they had found their first in the morning. Beauchamp, with his horse quite fresh from his short respite, when assisting the fallen hero, went rapidly away from the rest (whose horses were already in distress from the pace up to the road), and was standing on the lawn with the hounds (the fox being suspended in a tree) baying around, at least five minutes before any other horseman made his appearance; Mr. and Mrs. Compton, with the children and all the domestics, enjoying the scene.

To Beauchamp's surprise, the first man up was Markham, who exclaimed, "Eh! aw! Beauchamp, 'pon honour, gave 'em all the slip—hurrah!—awful pace, 'pon my soul, all right—won my bet!"

"But what a figure you are, Markham! Where's your hat?"

"In the brook, old fellow, where I left half-a-dozen with their horses; got out myself on the right side; up the hill like wildfire; passed the great man on the road—very squeamish indeed; cut into an old lane, leaving Burnett, Tyler, and Gwynne rasping away cross country to my right, and here I am, first for once in my life; and now, Beauchamp, give me the brush, which I would not lose for a five-pound note."

"I have promised it to Mrs. Compton," replied Beauchamp, "who was the first in at the finish."

"Then," replied that lady, "I willingly waive my claim in favour of Captain Markham, as a little compensation for the loss of his hat."

"Thank you, Mrs. Compton, for your kind consideration," replied the Captain, with a low bow; and the said appendage was accordingly handed to him by Charley, who pocketed a sovereign for the present.

"Won ten yellow boys, to-day," whispered the Captain.

"How so, sir?" inquired Charley.

"By your master beating the Leicestershire hero."

"Glad to hear it, sir; wish you had won fifty."

"Have you seen anything of Rushton?" inquired Mrs. Compton.

"Oh, yaas," replied Markham; "left him on the road; bad fall—ribs smashed, I suspect, or something of that sort—looked seedy—very."

"I hope not seriously hurt," said Mrs. Compton, anxiously.

"Oh, no, can't be—never *is* hurt, by his own account—only queerish."

Preceded by Sir Francis, Tyler, Fred Beauchamp, Gwynne, and Conyers, who were in the first flight, the lion of the day now hove in sight, looking unutterably disgusted; in fact, his whole frame had received so great a shock from his heavy fall on the hard road, that, although no bones were broken, he was fearfully bruised about his head, ribs, and right arm, which was nearly paralysed. Giving his horse to the groom, with sundry anathemas for his want of condition, the great man walked on to the lawn, where he stood for a few moments talking with Mrs. Compton, and then retired to his own room for the luxury of a warm bath.

The fox was now thrown to the hounds, as the heavy weights, including Sir Lionel, Squire Beauchamp, and others, with whom Vernon had been in company, arrived on the scene, and many and hearty were the congratulations on their capital day's sport.

"Ah, Compton!" exclaimed Conyers, "we have always luck on our side, when we meet at your place—no bagmen or three-legged ones here; and now for a glass of sherry to drink your health and a merry Christmas to all your family, with fifty new years to come, and may they find you still living as heretofore—the friend of fox-hunters."

"And a right hearty welcome to you all," replied Mr. Compton, who led the way into the house, followed by a goodly company of pink jackets, who gladly availed themselves of his proffered hospitality. Markham whispered Gwynne, "A hollow thing, eh? No mistake about first man."

"None whatever—Vernon must pay."

"All right, old fellow—tell him what you say."

The losing man did not relish the Captain's hint; but knowing his good nature, put him off by saying they would settle that another day.

"Play and pay, Vernon, is the rule on such occasions," said Markham; "so you must fork out; had I lost, you would have made me pay quickly enough."

"Oh, very well, I'll send you a draft to-morrow or next day," with which he turned aside.

On their way home, a comparison was instituted by Sir Francis and Conyers, between the riding of the two rival masters of fox-hounds, Rushton and Will Beauchamp.

"In Leicestershire," remarked Burnett, "I think Beauchamp would give way to the great squire."

"I don't think he would," retorted Conyers; "for this reason: Will rides with equal science and superior judgment to the other; he is always with his hounds, in and out of covert, and is exceedingly quick, without ever being in a flurry. See how quietly he creeps along, always selecting the best ground for his horse, whose resources he husbands to the utmost, with neither whip nor spur to harass or frighten him. Again, when approaching a large fence, he pulls his horse into a trot, if necessary, to give him wind and strength to clear it, easing or lifting him, as occasion may require. The falls he gets are very few and far between, yet he is, as a huntsman ought to be, always with his hounds; and as to his seat in the saddle, he is a perfect centaur—man and horse appear as one animal."

"That's all very true, Conyers," replied Burnett; "Will Beauchamp is a difficult man to beat in his own country, with his horses so thoroughly made to their master's hand, and at banks and stiff fences they are perfectly at home; but in Leicestershire those horses would cut a poor figure, where it is going from first to last without the hope of pulling up for a second: nothing but thorough-bred ones can live with hounds there."

"Very likely, Burnett; I don't dispute that point; but this I will maintain, that Will Beauchamp, equally well horsed, shall beat your hero in his own country six days out of ten throughout the season. Your man is fast and furious, but in my opinion not a thorough good rider, which no one ought to be called who gets such an extraordinary number of falls in a season; this, although a proof of daring, bull-dog courage, is no proof, but just the reverse, of good horsemanship."

"Well, Conyers, there is a good deal of sterling truth in your remarks, and, I must add, no man entertains a better opinion than I do of Will Beauchamp; so now, as our roads diverge, good night."

CHAPTER X.

Bob Conyers was not in words merely, but in deeds also, the firm friend of Will Beauchamp; and accordingly on the following Tuesday, we find him at Throseby Hall, sitting with Mrs. Harcourt in her drawing-room, in the hope of eliciting some information about the invitation to Marston Castle, which he knew had been received the previous day; but that lady evincing no disposition to enlighten him on the subject, Conyers hazarded an experiment at drawing the badger, which fully succeeded, by saying, "I have promised Blanche another riding lesson, and if she is not otherwise engaged, will come over on Thursday morning for that purpose."

"We shall not be at home that day," was the reply.

"Oh, very well, the next morning then," said Bob.

"We shall be absent, I fear, that day also," replied Mrs. Harcourt.

"Oh, then, I will find Blanche, and give her a lesson now, which will do just as well—there she is, walking in the garden." And without more ado, Bob took up his hat, and left the room. In a few minutes he was walking by her side to the stables, and having ordered her horse to be saddled, she returned to the house to put on her habit, whilst Bob entered the drawing-room.

"I do not quite approve," began Mrs. Harcourt, "of Blanche riding."

"It is the most healthful recreation in the world, my dear madam," replied Bob, "and strongly recommended to your niece by your own physician, as the means of giving her exercise and the benefit of the air, without much fatigue."

"Yes, I believe in moderation it is very well, but I dread her becoming a second Selina Markham."

"Then she must change her character entirely," said Bob, "and I never wish Blanche to ride after the fox-hounds; in fact, to tell you the truth, my dear madam, I do not approve of ladies going out hunting."

"Yet Constance does?"

"Oh, no, merely to see the hounds throw off, and then return home; but Blanche is even too timid for that; and certainly I shall never advise her to do anything of the kind, although most husbands, and particularly those of the aristocracy, like to see their wives with a good seat on horseback, to parade them in Rotten Row during the London season: and who knows but Blanche may one day become a countess?" At these words, the lady in question entered the room, and they at once set out for their ride.

When they had passed the lodge gates, Blanche, who had overheard his last words in the drawing-room, inquired what he was saying to Mrs. Harcourt about a countess.

"Why, my dear Blanche," said Bob, "your aunt Harcourt intends you shall become a duchess, or a countess, at least."

"Oh, nonsense, Mr. Conyers; don't, pray, talk so foolishly."

"Well, then, let me ask, are you not going to-morrow to spend a few days at Marston?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Has such an invitation ever been sent before to Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt and yourself?"

"No, I think not."

"Ah," replied Bob, "I see it all."

"What do you see, Mr. Conyers?"

"I will tell you, dear Blanche, on one condition—that you do not reveal what I say to any human being."

"I should never think of doing so," replied Blanche.

"Very well; you will find at Marston Castle a certain nobleman, called Lord Vancourt, who will pay you great attention, and whom your aunt will try and persuade you to marry."

Blanche blushed scarlet at this information, and said, "This is very improbable, Mr. Conyers!"

"Is Bob Conyers a false prophet, Miss Douglas? But now mark me, if you do not meet this lord, if he does not pay you the greatest attentions, and within a very short time propose for you, you may then call me one. They have laid a trap to catch you, my dear girl; and Captain Melville told me at Compton's ball the other night, that a more unprincipled scoundrel (those were his expressions) than this same Lord Vancourt does not exist; and now your old friend and master having done his duty in warning you of the net set to catch you, he has only one word more to say on the subject, and that one word is—*beware!*"

"Oh, Mr. Conyers," said the young girl, almost in tears, "how can I repay you for your ever kind interest in my welfare?"

"It would be strange indeed," replied he, "if I did not take an interest, and a deep one too, in that sweet girl I have so often nursed when a child, who has neither father nor brother to watch over and protect her; and I am fearful your guardian is too worldly-minded to consult your true happiness (which ought to be his chief consideration) in settling you in life; in fact, I know well that both he and Mrs. Harcourt are resolved on forming some brilliant matrimonial alliance for you amongst the nobility, to which rank they think you have a right to aspire. Perceiving that such are their intentions, as your sincere friend, I wish to caution you to consult your own inclinations before their wishes, and never to be persuaded to marry any man, however high in rank, unless his character and disposition are such as to ensure your happiness. Now, dear

Blanche, my lecture is finished, for which you may perhaps think old Bob Conyers a fool; but I could not rest happy until I had told you my suspicions, and given you my advice."

"Indeed, Mr. Conyers," said Blanche, "I feel most grateful for your kindness on this and many more occasions, and I shall ever regard you as one of my best friends."

"Well, whenever you want my advice or assistance, do not hesitate a moment, dear Blanche, in applying to me; but our conversation to-day must be kept a secret from Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt, and do not mention that you heard of Lord Vancourt being expected at Marston, or they will accuse me of intermeddling in what does not concern me."

"You may depend I shall never reveal what you tell me in confidence." After which they proceeded on their ride.

A select party had been asked to meet Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt on the day of their arrival at Marston Castle, besides the guests staying in the house, two of whom were Mr. Harley and his sister, a matronly personage of about forty, clever, well-informed, and chatty, who, having received her instructions from her brother, was fully prepared to laud Lord Vancourt to the skies; in fact, there was what is termed a *packed* jury of ladies and gentlemen, carefully chosen by Lord Mervyn from the class *sycophantic*, who never ventured to hold an opinion on any matter adverse to his lordship's—Tyler and Vernon being included.

Lord Vancourt, who had arrived that day, was about twenty-eight years of age, tall, standing over six feet, with a very good, well-proportioned figure, decidedly handsome, of rather aristocratic-looking features, and an aquiline nose. He had also a profusion of curly black hair, with very bushy eyebrows; but there was a sinister expression in the eye, which revealed much of his true character. In disposition, he was naturally haughty, overbearing, passionate, and uncompromising; but having mixed a great deal in good society, his manners were highly polished, and he had the art of rendering himself most agreeable to ladies, with whom he carefully repressed all indications of ill-temper or impatience.

During the dinner hour, having travelled a great deal, he related in a pleasant, unostentatious manner his various adventures by sea and land, and even Blanche, notwithstanding Bob's warning, thought him the most agreeable man she had ever met; there was, however, a peculiar expression sometimes in his eyes, so searching and almost fierce, that she felt frightened when they were riveted on her.

On the ladies retiring to the drawing-room, Mrs. Harcourt, who had been exceedingly pleased with Lord Vancourt, could not suppress her expressions of admiration, to which Miss Harley fully assented, declaring him a most charming, delightful person, so well-informed and unaffected, although of such superior manners and high talents. "In short, my dear madam," said that crafty lady, "Lord Vancourt is quite the *ton* in the highest circles in town, and eagerly sought after, also, on account of his splendid fortune."

"Is it not surprising, then," inquired Mrs. Harcourt, "that he is still unmarried?"

"Oh, not in the least; his lordship is so very particular in his choice, fearing he may be accepted on account of his title and fortune: and I think it most probable, with his romantic ideas about women and marriage, that he will assume the disguise of a walking tourist some day, in search of a country damsel, and marry her for love only."

This artful speech struck home to Mrs. Harcourt, who thought secretly that he would be just the match to suit her niece. Among the company that evening were the Rollestons, who had brought with them Captain Melville; and Caroline Rolleston was sitting with Blanche, when Miss Harley was passing such high eulogiums on Lord Vancourt.

"Good heavens!" said Caroline, "how can that woman go on telling such stories about Lord Vancourt, who is one of the most gay, dissipated men about town, and as poor as a country curate; and they do say, my dear" (in a whisper) "already married to an opera dancer? but the latter is a secret, which Melville let fall one day, quite unintentionally, and therefore it may be treason to mention it."

"Do you think that can really be true?" inquired Blanche.

"Indeed, I do; Captain Melville is a person above the suspicion of uttering a falsehood. And did you observe, before dinner, when Lord Vancourt approached to shake hands with him, that he drew back, making him a very low bow?"

"Perhaps they may have had some quarrel," observed Blanche.

"Most likely," replied Caroline, "since no two men can be of more opposite ideas; but papa says that Captain Melville is a perfect gentleman, and of most honourable feelings."

As they were discussing these points, the gentlemen entered the room, for Lord Mervyn having observed there was something amiss between his *protegé*, Lord Vancourt, and Captain Melville, proposed their joining the ladies very early, before any unpleasantry could occur.

Lord Vancourt, dreading some exposure from Melville, avoided the heiress that evening, for fear of exciting his remarks, devoting himself chiefly to Lady Mervyn, whilst Melville endeavoured to do the agreeable to Miss Douglas. The evening (with Lord Mervyn's dark looks, which exercised a decided influence over the greater part of the company) passed uncomfortably enough to all except Melville, who was quite enchanted with Blanche, thinking her the most lovely, unaffected girl he had ever been acquainted with.

The next and three following days, Lord Vancourt paid very assiduous attention to the heiress, for which every opportunity was afforded him by Lord and Lady Mervyn; Mr. Harley and his sister pursuing a like plan with Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt, by always speaking of Lord Vancourt in the highest terms.

Poor Blanche was much more frightened than gratified by his lordship's close attendance upon her during the live-long day; but her timid, bashful manner, with downcast eyes and blushing cheek, when his glance met hers, led his lordship to the conclusion that he had made a most decided and favourable impression upon the heart of the youthful heiress, and that the game was now safe in his own hands.

It is quite true that more facilities are afforded to love-making in a quiet country house, during one week, than may occur in a twelvemonth under different circumstances, with the chance of meeting at a dinner party or a ball occasionally; which, with so many interruptions and lookers-on, is comparatively a tedious process, and must take a due allowance of time. So prosperously had Vancourt advanced already in the opinion of the conspirators, Mervyn, Vernon, and Harley, that they considered the prize as nearly won, and that he had only now to offer his hand to be accepted; forgetting the old adage of "there being many a slip betwixt the cup and the lip."

Lord Vancourt objected, however, to such precipitancy; avowing his belief that too much haste would spoil the whole affair.

"Strike while the iron is hot, is my advice," said Vernon.

"You are mistaken," replied Vancourt; "the iron is not half hot yet, and that girl is so timid that I cannot get on with her as I have done with other women, and see clearly I must take more time with one of her reserved disposition, and lure her on step by step."

"Well," remarked Harley, "your lordship is a better judge of such matters than I pretend to be; and being the chief person concerned, you have the best reason to act as you think most conducive to your own ends."

The Harcourts had been invited to spend a week at Marston, but on the fifth morning a letter arrived from Lord Malcolm, saying he should arrive that same day at Throseby Hall, which obliged Mr. Harcourt to curtail his visit very suddenly, and return home immediately, much to Blanche's delight, who, on the plea of a headache, could not be induced to leave her room till the carriage was at the door. During her stay at the castle, whether out walking with Miss Mervyn, or taking a drive in the pony carriage, when the weather would admit, Lord Vancourt contrived to be constantly by her side, Vernon attaching himself to Miss Mervyn; and in their rambles about the grounds, he kept that young lady at a sufficient distance from Blanche, that Vancourt might have every facility for ingratiating himself into her favour; but the thing was overdone, and Blanche having been left several times in this manner by Miss Mervyn, her suspicions were fairly excited by this oft-repeated trick, and Lord Vancourt's increased *empressement* of manner and language, which even her artless nature could not misunderstand. Blanche Douglas (even if her heart had been entirely free) was a person of such delicate and refined feelings, that Lord Vancourt's conduct (being an acquaintance of only a few days) was becoming quite irksome to her; and for the last day she had avoided being left alone with him, pleading indisposition, to remain in her room until the dinner hour.

Vernon, however, had met with a very different reception from Miss Mervyn, who had fallen desperately in love with him; and thus, whilst apparently playing Lord Mervyn's game, he had been, in fact, most industriously dealing his own cards, and obtained a confession from Miss Mervyn of her attachment, which, as a matter of course, was to remain a profound secret for the present.

On their return to Throseby, the Harcourts found Lord Malcolm, who had arrived just before them, and Blanche was in high spirits on again meeting her cousin.

"Why, dear Blanche, you are wonderfully improved within the last year—become quite the woman. Well, girls do run up in an extraordinary manner, and I suppose you must now be called Miss Douglas."

"Never by you, Charles, I hope," she replied, "or by any of my true friends."

"Well, dear girl, I am delighted to find you looking so lovely and so happy; but tell me," in a whisper, "how is Constance?"

"As beautiful as ever, or more so," she replied, laughing; "but we have been staying at that disagreeable place, Marston Castle, nearly a week, and therefore I have seen nothing of her during that time."

"Well, then, Blanche, we will ride over to Bampton the day after to-morrow."

"Why not to-morrow, Charles?"

"It won't do, my dear; old Harcourt would take offence at my leaving him the first day; and, besides, I think to-morrow is Beauchamp's hunting day, and I long to shake him by the hand; for, between ourselves, Blanche, my love for Constance has arisen partly from my love and esteem for her brother, who is a man after my own heart."

During the latter part of this speech, Blanche, feeling a little colour spreading over her cheek, turned away, and ran upstairs to change her dress.

The next day, while Lord Malcolm was sitting with Mrs. Harcourt and Blanche in the drawing-room, Lord Vancourt was announced, who remained for nearly an hour, paying very pointed attention to Miss Douglas. When he left, Mrs. Harcourt asked Malcolm—

"What do you think of Lord Vancourt? Is he not most polished and agreeable, and strikingly handsome?"

"All that I admit, yet I don't like him."

"Why?" inquired Mrs. Harcourt.

"I can't say exactly, but he has an expression to me quite repulsive, and from which I should set him down as haughty and bad-tempered."

"Oh, that is only your fancy, Malcolm."

"Perhaps so, but I shall not alter my opinion until I know more of him."

No further remarks were made by Mrs. Harcourt, who did not wish Blanche to be prejudiced against Lord Vancourt, in case her cousin should not now come forward, as was expected. But when Blanche and Malcolm went out afterwards for a walk, the latter remarked upon his lordship's attentions to her, and said—

"I perceive Lord Vancourt is a great admirer of yours, my fair cousin, and first favourite on the list, I should think, from your tell-tale blushes and downcast eyes, when he was addressing you."

"Indeed, Charles, he is no favourite of mine; and although extremely pleasing, yet I feel quite frightened in his company."

"Oh, that feeling may wear off on more intimate acquaintance," rejoined Malcolm; "but first impressions with me are not easily effaced; and I tell you candidly, dear Blanche, I fear he will make a bad husband; so don't decide in his favour until you have seen more of the world, and a great deal more of Lord Vancourt. You will have plenty to pick and choose from, with your large fortune; so take my advice—don't be in a hurry to marry yet."

"Indeed I shall not, Charles; and I am quite sure Lord Vancourt would never be my choice."

"Very well, Blanche, wait till next spring, when you come out in town, and I will introduce you to two or three of our young nobility, equally good-looking, with better connections than Lord Vancourt, and really good fellows into the bargain."

At breakfast, next morning, Malcolm expressed his intention of taking Blanche with him to call at Bampton, to which no objection was raised, as Mrs. Harcourt wished to throw no obstacles in the way of the two cousins being together. Lord Malcolm was rejoiced to find his friend Beauchamp at home, and the meeting between his lordship and Constance was what might be expected from two affianced lovers, in which relation they stood to each other, although it was not generally known. Leaving the two girls together, Beauchamp and his friend, who was very fond of hunting, walked off to inspect the kennels and stables, and Lord Malcolm could not help remarking on Beauchamp's altered manner and grave looks.

"What's the matter with you?" inquired his friend; "all your buoyancy of spirits is gone; are you in love, Beauchamp, or what is it?"

"Oh, I'm only a little out of sorts to-day."

"Come, come, Beauchamp, that will not pass with me—I know you too well; surely you can trust your own brother elect with anything that lies heavy at your heart. Many a secret have I confided to your keeping, and now, my dear fellow, I expect the same confidence from you. No evasion, if you love me as I do you."

Beauchamp, thus pressed, confessed his long-growing attachment to Blanche, and reproached himself for having made her acquainted with his love at Mrs. Compton's ball. "That has hung heavy upon me ever since," he added; "for I feel I have done wrong in trying to gain her affections before entering on the world, when she will, of course, see so many, far my superiors in birth, endowments, and fortune. In short, Malcolm, I have no pretensions to one so far beyond my deserts; and then the idea of being called a fortune-hunter haunts me day and night. I have become miserable; what to do, I know not; will you advise me?"

"Yes, Beauchamp, most willingly, when you have answered me one question. Were Blanche Douglas no heiress, would you lay open your heart to her?"

"Yes, Malcolm, for I am sure I can never love another; yet I would still leave her disengaged to me for a twelvemonth."

"Why so?"

"Because I think she is too young to be tied to any such serious engagement, until she has seen more of the world."

"Ah!" said Lord Malcolm, "this is self-denial to excess, and few, except Will Beauchamp, could argue thus against themselves. Well, I will consider these points to-night, and advise you how to act to-morrow; and now let us have some luncheon, after which you and Constance must ride part of the way home with us."

Beauchamp raising some objection to this proposal, was met by Malcolm with these words—"Don't make a greater simpleton of yourself than you have already this morning, in making these silly confessions, or I shall lose all my patience! Come along directly, and order the horses, for I want an opportunity of making love to Constance, if you do not to Blanche."

After luncheon, the party set out for Throseby, but as the road admitted of two only abreast, it is superfluous to say how the two couples were arranged. Lord Malcolm was in high spirits—unpleasantly so to Beauchamp, who, being completely under the influence of the blues, exhibited a sad contrast to his more happy friend; and as he rode thoughtful and abstracted by the side of Blanche, she could not fail to notice his altered looks and manner; still he was, as usual, most friendly, giving her some useful hints in regard to the management of her horse, and speaking on all other subjects except the one nearest to his heart. At first, Blanche was timid, and fearful of a repetition of some love professions; but seeing his determination to avoid all such topics, her reserve wore off.

"I hear," he said, "you have been staying at Marston Castle; were you pleased with your visit?"

"Oh, no," she replied; "Lord and Lady Mervyn are, in my opinion, very stiff, formal, disagreeable people."

"Did you meet no pleasant persons there?" he inquired; "I heard the house was full of company."

"Yes, there was a Lord Vancourt, very agreeable and good-looking, resembling much in manners Mr. Vernon, who was there also; but I must confess I was delighted when our visit was over."

"Then you did not admire this Lord Vancourt, of whom report speaks so highly as a perfect ladies' man?"

"Oh, no," replied Blanche; "he is the counterpart of Mr. Vernon, whom, you know, I dislike exceedingly."

Beauchamp breathed more freely after this confession from Blanche, and some of his usual frank gaiety of looks and manners returned.

"You, of course, mean to attend our grand ball on the last of this month?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she replied; "you know I make my *début* in public on that occasion."

"Then will you allow me the pleasure of being your first partner on that eventful night, unless you have already promised that favour to another?"

"Indeed, William, I shall not only be delighted, but shall feel less nervous, in having the support of an old friend on my first introduction to the *beau monde*."

"Thank you, dear Blanche," he replied, with his accustomed warmth; "and may you never find a friend less staunch and true than William Beauchamp."

"I neither wish nor expect to find another friend like you; but now I see Constance and Charles are halting for us."

"Well, Beauchamp," he exclaimed, as they rode up, "we must now change partners, as Constance wishes to return; but mind you both ride over, and repay our visit the day after to-morrow."

"I can't promise that exactly," was Beauchamp's answer, in a very grave tone.

"Oh, indeed! then Constance must ride by herself, I suppose," retorted Malcolm, angrily, "unless you think she ought not to have promised me to come at all?"

"No, Malcolm; I shall certainly accompany her, if that is so."

"And be in a better humour next time we meet," continued

Malcolm. "But now, come, shake hands, old fellow; I can't afford to quarrel with you."

The friendly parting was exchanged on all sides, when Malcolm and Blanche turned their horses' heads, the former suddenly exclaiming, "What can be the matter with Will Beauchamp, Blanche? I never saw such an alteration in any man since we last met; he looks as if he had been crossed in love. What can be the matter with him?"

"I really cannot tell, Charles."

"Do you think he is in love, Blanche?" he again asked.

"How should I know, Charles?" she answered, while the crimson mounted to her very temples.

"You do know something more than you choose to tell me, dear Blanche," as he looked inquiringly into her face, which she endeavoured to turn away, to conceal her confusion. "Only tell me one thing, my dearest girl," continued Malcolm, as he placed his hand affectionately on hers; "by our friendship and cousinly affection for each other, by my brotherly love for you, tell me, dear Blanche, in confidence, as your own dear brother—can you, do you love Will Beauchamp?" There was no reply.

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated Malcolm, fervently; "I am now the happiest man in existence. Will Beauchamp's conduct is explained; he loves, as he ever must, deeply and unalterably where his affections have been once bestowed; but, poor fellow! he thinks he loves hopelessly—he is too unpretending and modest to believe that the rich heiress, Miss Douglas, will ever condescend to accept him as a lover. Yes, dear Blanche; this must be the real state of the case. I have known Beauchamp from a boy; he is high-spirited, of sound principles, honest and open as the day, and generous, even to a fault; yet withal as proud as Lucifer, where his conduct may be questioned as equivocal; and here it is—here's the rub, my dear Blanche—he dreads to be called a fortune-hunter, although ever so attached to you."

At this moment they were interrupted by Mark Rosier jumping over a stile into the road, close to Lord Malcolm.

"Ah, Mark," said his lordship, "how fares it with you since we last met?"

"It would have fared badly enough, my lord, but for the young squire, who saved my poor old father and mother from the workhouse."

"Indeed, Mark," said Lord Malcolm, seriously; "how could this happen?"

"Lord Mervyn there turned us all out into the road, and seized everything we had, even to the bed to lie upon, and all on account of the game, which has been our ruin; but the young squire stood our friend, and has given us a farm from Lady-day next, rent free, stock and all, until we can get round again. God bless him for it, and all belonging to him!" ended Mark, as he wiped a stray tear from his cheek.

"Here, then, Mark," said his lordship, putting a five-pound note into his hand, "give that to your father from me, to keep a merry Christmas;" and, touching his horse with the whip, he and Blanche cantered off.

"There, Blanche," he said, when they had left Mark behind, "that act at once explains the character of William Beauchamp; and now I expect a lecture from Mrs. Harcourt for keeping you out late," as they entered the lodge gates.

CHAPTER XI.

During the absence of Lord Malcolm and her niece, Mrs. Harcourt had been discussing his lordship rather more pertinently than he surmised; in short, she had insisted on Mr. Harcourt inquiring what his real intentions were towards his cousin. "It is really high time to know whether Malcolm seriously thinks of marrying Blanche or not," she remarked to her husband, "as it is very evident Lord Vancourt is very much taken with her; and, in case of his proposing, we should scarcely know what answer to give him."

"Very well, my dear, I will take an opportunity of sounding Malcolm the first time we are alone, although I am inclined to think, from my own observation, theirs may be only cousinly affection; but as the family from the castle dines here to-morrow, I will ascertain that point before their arrival, and let you know."

Accordingly, the next morning, after breakfast, when they were alone, Mr. Harcourt led to the point by asking some questions relative to Blanche's property in Scotland.

"It is in a very flourishing condition," replied Lord Malcolm; "and the tenants are improving their farms by draining, which will increase their own returns, as well as improve the value of the estate."

"Is there any prospect," inquired Mr. Harcourt, jocosely, "of the two properties being united under one head?"

"One manager, do you mean?"

"Yes, Charles; exactly so—in the person of Lord Malcolm," replied Mr. Harcourt, laughing.

"That," replied Lord Malcolm, gravely, "I fear, never can be, as Blanche and myself regard each other as cousins only; and, to confess the truth, my affections have been long engaged elsewhere, although I shall ever love her as a dear sister."

"I am sorry to hear this confession, Charles, as Blanche's father and your own always expressed a strong desire that their children might some day be united."

At this moment Blanche entered the room, prepared for a walk.

"I fear," she said, "I am interrupting you and Mr. Harcourt."

"Oh, no," replied Lord Malcolm; "I am quite ready to attend you, dear Blanche."

When they had left the house, Malcolm said, "It is just what I expected from old Harcourt's serious looks at breakfast. He has been asking me whether you were likely to become Lady Malcolm, and of course I told him we loved each other as cousins only. But there is more manœuvring in this than you suspect, my fair cousin. What should have induced old Harcourt to broach this subject so hastily and, I think, indelicately, when I had been only three days in his house? The answer to me is plain enough: that ill-conditioned Mervyn, with his chum Vancourt, dines here to-day, and Harcourt wished to ascertain my sentiments, in case my Lord Mervyn should make any allusion to his friend coming forward for the heiress. That's the secret, my dear girl; and, were it not for your sake, I feel so indignant at Harcourt's treatment, that I would leave his roof this very day."

"Oh, pray, Charles, don't think of doing that!"

"No, Blanche; I certainly will not for the next month, at least, although I know now he would be rejoiced to get rid of me; but nothing shall induce me, my dear girl, to leave you to be tormented by these plotters; and Harcourt shall rue the day he treated me with so little ceremony. But, for your sake, as I said before, I will smother my resentment, and pay him off in his own false coin."

The same afternoon Beauchamp and his sister rode over to return Lord Malcolm and Blanche's visit; and, after sitting some time with the ladies, the two friends sauntered out, at Malcolm's request, to see a new horse he had lately purchased. From the stables they took a stroll through the grounds, when Lord Malcolm told Beauchamp what had passed between himself and Mr. Harcourt, and his discovery of Blanche's love for him. "And now, my dear fellow, I congratulate you with all my heart; and it has made me one of the happiest of men to know that Blanche has bestowed her affections on him whom I would have selected from all the world to be her husband."

"But, my dear Malcolm," Beauchamp was beginning, when he was cut short by his friend.

"Not another word, Beauchamp. I know you and Blanche thoroughly, and your deep strong feelings; you are both alike. Therefore, I insist on your proposing to her, allowing a little scope for your romantic ideas of giving her a few months for consideration; but if at the end of that time you don't marry her—not supposing an impossibility, that *she* will ever change, though *you* may—I give you fair notice, old fellow, that I will call you out, and shoot you, too, if I can, for breaking my dear cousin's heart. That is the result of my cogitations on this subject, Will Beauchamp, since we last parted at Bampton; and this is my advice, which, for both our happiness, I trust and believe you will adopt. Now let us return to the ladies, or old Harcourt will think we are plotting some mischief; but had I no other reason for wishing you to marry her, Blanche Douglas shall never be sold, like a sheep in the shambles, to the highest bidder, by that worldly-minded pair, under whose roof she has the misfortune to be living. Lucky, indeed, is it that I happened to arrive just at this critical moment, when poor Blanche's happiness might have been wrecked for ever; withal, she is but a timid child, and requires a steady friend and strong arm to protect her, such as she ought to find in Will Beauchamp."

"That she shall never want, whilst I live," he replied.

"Thank you, Beauchamp; you now speak like yourself, manly and straightforward; but no more at present, walls have ears—and laurels too," as they approached the house.

A more heterogeneous party never met together than that selected by the Harcourts to grace their dinner-table that evening. Sir Lionel Markham differed on every subject with Lord Mervyn. Mr. Compton was decidedly as antagonistic to him in politics, and hated by his lordship for showing twice the number of pheasants, with plenty of foxes also, and for being most popular in the county. Sir Lucius Gwynne and Mr. Vernon, whose dislike to each other was well known; and Aunt Gordon, who (from sundry hints given her by Bob Conyers) felt disposed to quarrel with the whole castle party at first starting.

The only person who laboured assiduously, though hopelessly, to infuse some little harmony into this ill-assorted company, was Selina Markham, who sat next to Lord Malcolm. Lord Vancourt was endeavouring to engross attention by a description of his travels in Egypt and the Holy Land, and had been giving an account of the Pyramids, when Lord Malcolm, turning to Selina, said, "Ah! those Pyramids remind me of the fate of a travelling companion who was standing with me on the top of one, when, being seized with sudden giddiness, he fell, and rolled from step to step, until he was dashed to pieces."

"How very shocking!" exclaimed Selina; "what could you do?"

"Nothing; he was gone in a moment, before I missed him from my side; and feeling myself turning sick and giddy also, as I looked below, I threw myself down on my face, to prevent my sharing his untimely and wretched fate."

Lord Vancourt was silent whilst Malcolm related this accident, and did not afterwards deem it expedient to make many more allusions to his own adventures, finding another had been going over the same ground, who might probably catch him tripping.

All felt relieved when the ladies rose from the table to leave the dining-room, but little more advancement towards conviviality followed after their departure among the gentlemen, who seemed resolved to keep at a respectful distance from each other.

Lord Vancourt made two or three unsuccessful attempts to draw Malcolm into conversation, but his almost monosyllabic answers deterred him from indulging further hopes of being on good terms with his lordship, which he was most anxious to be, as living under the same roof with Miss Douglas, his friend Vernon having assured him there was no truth in the report that he was engaged to, or ever likely to marry, his cousin.

Sir Lionel and Mr. Compton, sitting together, were the only two who had any community of feelings or ideas, and even they were delighted when coffee was introduced, and a move made to join the ladies. Lord Vancourt was resolved, if possible, that evening, to find out how the case really stood between Lord Malcolm and the heiress; for which purpose, on entering the drawing-room, he attached himself to Mrs. Harcourt, and soon after, observing Blanche in low and earnest conversation with her cousin, apart from the company, he remarked upon their being so much interested in each other's society, and said, in a low tone, "The report of their engagement seems fully confirmed, Mrs. Harcourt."

"There is no engagement between them, my lord," replied that lady, "although both Mr. Harcourt and myself have long indulged such hopes, from their estates in Scotland joining each other, and also because we have the greatest regard for Lord Malcolm."

"I should judge from appearances," said Lord Vancourt, "that they were most unquestionably attached to each other."

"Merely cousinly affection," was the answer. "Malcolm has expressed himself so unequivocally on the subject, that it admits of no doubt."

A triumphant smile played for a moment over the features of Lord Vancourt at this announcement, but he immediately turned the conversation into another channel. Malcolm maintained his position near Blanche the whole evening, accompanying her to the piano (when requested by Mrs. Harcourt to sing), and Lord Vancourt, perceiving his intention to prevent his advances that night, prudently gave way, and consoled himself with Mrs. Harcourt's society, in whose good opinion he had already made rapid progress.

The common topic of conversation was the annual ball which was to take place at Cherrington on the thirty-first of the month, now quickly approaching.

"I shall certainly attend that ball," said Mrs. Gordon, who had now joined Blanche and Malcolm, "to witness your introduction to the world, my dear girl; and you will find me always ready to act as your chaperon, as Mrs. Harcourt, I dare say, will be engaged with her numerous friends."

"I am so happy to hear you will be there, dear aunt," replied Blanche, "as your presence will give me confidence on this trying occasion."

"Not that you will see much more of your aunt," said Malcolm, laughing, "than if she were at the Priory; for, rest assured, your numerous admirers will engage the heiress for every dance."

"She shall not dance more than she likes," replied Mrs.

Gordon; "and, when fatigued, she will find a seat by my side."

"By-the-bye, Blanche," said Malcolm, "I must claim the privilege of trotting out my fair cousin on that auspicious occasion, by dancing the first dance with her, as in duty bound."

Blanche blushed deeply, and not replying, her cousin said, "Then you decline my handsome offer, eh, Blanche?"

"Mr. Beauchamp asked me the other day for the first, but I shall be most happy to dance with you the second."

"Well, dear girl, that will do equally well, and Constance shall be my first partner, so that point is settled beforehand, and you shall be our *vis-à-vis* with Will Beauchamp: there, aunt, that will do nicely, and of course all eyes will be directed towards the two handsomest couples in the room. Don't you think, aunt, I am an uncommonly smart, good-looking fellow, just as described in the old ballad?—

'He's as tall and as straight as a poplar tree,
  And his cheeks are as red as the rose;
And he looks like a squire of high degree,
  When dressed in his Sunday's clothes!'"

"My dear Charles," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, "how can you quote such trash? you are a very boy still."

"Yes, aunty dear, and I hope to continue so for some few years to come, until arrived at years of discretion, when I suppose I shall exclaim

'Life's a farce, and all things show it;
I *thought* so once, but now I know it.'

Well, thank goodness, the castle party are on the wing, and I wish them joy of their drive home, with that vicious old Mervyn boxed up with them, who is like a mad dog when things don't suit him, snapping at every one in his way. That poor girl of his must lead a happy life with such parents."

"Hush, Charles, they are coming towards us."

"To shake hands with Blanche, I suppose," whispered Malcolm, "and try to get her over to the castle again."

Lady Mervyn, who was leaning on Lord Vancourt's arm, extended her hand most graciously to Blanche, who rose as they approached, and his lordship was about to make her a similar offer of friendly greeting, which with a curtsey she declined, and resumed her seat, soon after which all the other guests took leave.

A frost now set in, which put a stop to hunting, and Lord

Malcolm, as was natural to suppose, rode over frequently to Bampton, sometimes taking Blanche with him. On their return one afternoon, when Blanche had left the room, Mrs. Harcourt expressed her disapprobation of her niece accompanying him so often to Bampton.

"On what account, Mrs. Harcourt, do you object to her visiting there? Constance and Blanche have always been like sisters since childhood."

"They are no longer children; and I wish my niece to make some higher acquaintances now, with persons moving in that sphere to which I hope to see her soon elevated."

"Oh, indeed! that is your reason, is it, Mrs. Harcourt? Then allow me to observe, that I do not think Blanche Douglas will be ever in such a position as to feel degraded by or ashamed of the society of Lady Malcolm."

"I do not understand you, Charles."

"Very likely, but when I state my hopes that Constance Beauchamp will ere long become my wife, my meaning is explicit enough."

"Are you really serious, Lord Malcolm?"

"Never more so. Mr. Beauchamp, after a good deal of opposition, gave his consent to our marriage, but only on the condition that we spend half the year at Bampton during his life."

"In place of giving his daughter any fortune, I suppose?" replied Mrs. Harcourt, with a sneer.

"No, not exactly that, either, my dear madam, as, the day I marry his daughter, he transfers into my name thirty thousand pounds, which he showed by his banker's books are now in the funds."

"Really, Malcolm, I did not think Mr. Beauchamp had any money at all there, as people say he is very poor."

"People say what they wish others to believe, out of spite, envy, or malice," replied Malcolm; "but as *I* am satisfied, that is quite sufficient."

"Oh, of course," rejoined Mrs. Harcourt; "but since *I* do not intend *Blanche* to marry a *Beauchamp,* I shall be obliged by your not taking her to Bampton again."

"William Beauchamp," said Malcolm, "is of as high and good connections, and of a prouder spirit than yourself, and you may rest assured will never obtrude himself into any family where he does not meet a welcome reception;" with which he rose, and left the room.

Lord Vancourt had called twice whilst Blanche was out riding with her cousin, which annoyed Mrs. Harcourt, and she resolved, therefore, for the future, to keep her more at home, in the hope of his lordship proposing, as both Mr. Harcourt and herself were so pleased with him, and assured by Lord Mervyn of his large fortune also, that they had made up their minds to accept his proposal for their niece; and Mrs. Harcourt, dreading lest Malcolm might influence his cousin in favour of Beauchamp, thought the sooner the thing could be settled the better.

The next day, when Malcolm was out shooting, Lord Vancourt, under the pretence of inviting him to a shooting-party at the castle (which he knew very well he would not accept), called again at Throseby, and found the ladies at home; and after sitting some time, Mrs. Harcourt rose, under the excuse of having mislaid her handkerchief, leaving poor Blanche alone with her unwelcome admirer.

Her embarrassment and varying colour having impressed his lordship with the belief of his having inspired her with an interest in his favour, he began at first speaking of the ball, to lead her on, expressing a hope that she would honour him with her hand in the first dance.

"For that I am engaged," she replied.

"The second, then, Miss Douglas?" The same answer, at which my lord bit his lip, and fire flashed from his dark, piercing eye, which did not escape Blanche's notice. "May I plead, then, for the next, Miss Douglas? in which I hope for better success."

"I do not recollect that I am engaged for that, and shall be happy to dance with you, provided it is a quadrille, as I do not waltz."

"I must, of course, submit to your own terms," remarked his lordship; "and among so many advocates for your hand, I consider myself highly honoured by your accepting me for your partner;" and he was proceeding in a strain of flattery and adulation, every moment becoming more irksome to poor Blanche, when Lord Malcolm entered the room, and she instantly hurried up-stairs. To account for his lordship's unexpected entrance, we must explain, that having gone out shooting that morning, and posted himself on the outside of a small gorse covert on the hill above the house, his attention was attracted by a horse galloping on the hard gravel road, and looking down, he beheld Lord Vancourt rapidly riding up to the door. Telling the keeper to go on beating until his return, he ran down the hill, and arrived in time to prevent the *éclaircissement* that Lord Vancourt purposed making to his cousin. His annoyance at finding Blanche had been left alone by Mrs. Harcourt did not tend to improve his ill-humour; and having politely declined Lord Mervyn's invitation, Lord Vancourt rose and left the room, his horse and groom being at the door.

The evening of the ball had now arrived, and about ten o'clock the heiress made her first appearance in public, leaning on Mrs. Harcourt's arm, who stalked majestically into the ball-room with the air of the highest personage in the land. Blanche was dressed in white, with an elegance and simplicity which did justice to her beauty as well as her taste; and with her graceful figure and sweet, artless expression of countenance, looked the personification of loveliness. William Beauchamp, having purposely arrived early, was waiting with Constance near the door, and accosted them, on their entrance, with his usual frankness of manner; and whilst his sister was speaking to Mrs. Harcourt, re-engaged Blanche for the first dance.

Mrs. Harcourt, although overhearing her niece's assent to Beauchamp's request, said she wished to take a survey of the company before dancing commenced (for the purpose, secretly, of parading her charge, and preventing, if possible, her accepting Beauchamp's arm for the first quadrille); and with this view, kept her talking to some acquaintances at the top of the room until the sets were formed, notwithstanding Beauchamp's hints that they must now take their places, to which Mrs. Harcourt turned a deaf ear, and persisted in retaining a tight hold of her niece's arm.

"Aunt Harcourt," whispered the poor girl, timidly, "I am engaged to Mr. Beauchamp for the first dance, and he is waiting."

"Oh, it does not signify, my dear; you can dance the second with him, as I wish to introduce you to Lord and Lady Seaton, who, I see, have just arrived."

"But I am engaged to Charles for the second," whispered Blanche.

"Well, my dear, it cannot be helped, as I really must present you to some of my particular friends first; there will be ample time for dancing afterwards."

Beauchamp, however, would not be thrown off by these manœuvres, and doggedly following Mrs. Harcourt, that lady, now thinking she had deprived him of his dance, at last resigned her niece's arm. As Beauchamp walked away with her, he said, rather indignantly—

"Mrs. Harcourt has purposely prevented me enjoying this dance with you, dear Blanche. I will not be disappointed, however, in the next; we are too late now to join in this set, which, if I could, I would not."

"But I have promised Charles the second."

"Oh, never mind; he will give that to me when he hears how badly I have been treated—that is, unless you would prefer dancing with him."

"Oh, no," she replied, "if Charles will not be offended."

"Now then, Blanche, I see Aunt Gordon looking towards us. We must go and speak to her."

Her surprise at seeing Blanche walking about, instead of dancing, was increased to indignation when told by Beauchamp of Mrs. Harcourt's behaviour.

"Sit down here, my love, and I will be your chaperon for the rest of the evening."

"I must leave her a moment with you, dear aunt," said Beauchamp, "whilst I speak a few words with Malcolm;" after which he immediately returned, and sat down by Blanche, telling her Malcolm had kindly waived his claim to her hand for the next dance. They were joined by Constance and her partner soon after, when Malcolm said she must now dance the third with him.

"I am sorry to say, Charles, I am engaged for that to Lord Vancourt."

"Oh, indeed!" said Malcolm, whilst his brow contracted with anger; "then the fourth, Blanche?"

"Yes, Charles, with pleasure."

"How provoking," said Malcolm to Constance, "that we cannot have a dance together with Blanche and Beauchamp; but I won't be done in this manner, so you must stand up with me again, Constance, as their *vis-à-vis*."

"Oh," said Constance, laughing, "it is not etiquette, Charles, to dance two quadrilles in succession with the same person."

"Nonsense about etiquette, Constance! will you refuse me for form's sake?"

"Certainly not, if you particularly wish it."

"That I do, dear girl, and mind we all four join again in the last dance. Do you agree to this, Blanche?" he inquired.

"If Mrs. Harcourt will not be angry at my dancing twice with William."

"You are no longer a child," replied Malcolm, "to be tied to Mrs. Harcourt's apron-strings, and have a right now to please yourself; but what says Aunt Gordon, whose ideas on such subjects are quite as correct as Mrs. Harcourt's?"

"I see no impropriety in such arrangement if Blanche has no other objection."

"None whatever, dear aunt; and I shall be delighted to join Charles and Constance in the last dance of the evening."

"Thank you, dear Blanche," whispered Beauchamp, "and now we must take our places."

Many scrutinising and invidious glances were directed towards the heiress and her partner as they glided gracefully through the figure, too much pleased in each other's company to bestow a thought or care for the lookers-on. Lord Vancourt remarked to Vernon—"You have underrated him."

"Not much, I think," was the reply.

"Decidedly, Vernon, he is very gentlemanly in manners, good-looking, and altogether the sort of man any young girl would fall desperately in love with; in short, I must be quick; and even now, from what I see, my impression is that I am too late in the field."

"You have two to one on your side, my lord, and Beauchamp has no more chance than I have."

"He has a bold, determined look," replied Vancourt, "just that of a man who will not stick at trifles when he has a point to gain."

"That girl won't run away with any man," said Vernon, "although she may be carried away. Do you take, my lord? and with the consent of her guardian, which is the same thing, supposing the young lady rather coy to yourself, I should not hesitate one moment."

"That is a very serious affair, Vernon."

"Not in your case, my lord. Make your proposal first to her guardian—if accepted, you are all right; and I am quite sure they will both press your offer upon their ward, for fear of Beauchamp. This, of course, you will find out from what Harcourt says in reply to your proposal; and if she refuses you can fairly plead their consent, and your deep, passionate, uncontrollable love for the young lady, which induced you to have recourse to a little stratagem. That's all, my lord, and you will never hear another word on the subject after the heiress has become

Lady Vancourt. Why, in Scotland, the thing is settled in five minutes by the blacksmith—bribe him well, and he will get two other persons to say they heard her say she would take you for her husband, and of course you will say you took her for your wife, and there's an end to the business. You will then be man and wife, and if she should run away from you afterwards (which I don't think likely), her money is safe at any rate."

"Really, Vernon, you are up to a thing or two, and argue very plausibly; but I must consider well before I undertake such a project, although it appears feasible enough. Now the quadrille's over, I shall claim her hand, and try what impression I can make first."

This conversation had been carried on in a low tone by Lord Vancourt and Vernon, who were standing apart near a window; and their attention was so much engrossed by watching the heiress and Beauchamp dancing, that they did not perceive Bob Conyers, who sat ensconced in a seat behind the window-curtains, and who therefore heard sufficient to apprise him of their intentions.

"Ha! ha!" thought Bob, "a rascally trick, my lord and Mr. Vernon, between you! but I'll put Beauchamp and Malcolm up to the dodge, and Aunt Gordon, too, before this time to-morrow night."

As Beauchamp, after the quadrille, was making his way with Blanche to where Mrs. Gordon was sitting, Lord Vancourt presented himself before her, saying she had promised him the honour of her hand for the next dance, and offered his arm, which Blanche, not knowing the rules on such occasions, was hesitating whether to accept or not, when Beauchamp said quickly to her—"I must consign you first to your aunt, as a waltz succeeds this quadrille, in which you do not join."

"I shall not brook your interference, sir," said Vancourt, haughtily.

"Nor I yours, Lord Vancourt," retorted Beauchamp, as, drawing himself up, he resolutely passed on.

"William," said Blanche, earnestly looking in his face, and pressing her hand upon his arm, "I hope you will not quarrel with Lord Vancourt."

"No, dear Blanche, if possible to avoid it; but you shall not be imposed upon or insulted by any human being."

"Oh, he did not intend that, I hope," said Blanche.

"There was an impertinence in his manner, by stopping you when leaning on my arm, and knowing well he had no right then to interrupt us or claim your hand, which I could not submit to."

"But, William, promise me it shall go no further—promise me not to quarrel with him—for my sake, William, will you do this?" she inquired, beseechingly, as he seemed to hesitate.

"Yes, dearest Blanche," in a low tone, "for your dear sake will I do anything."

"Thank you," she replied, with one of her sweet smiles, "and remember, if you forget your promise, you will make me wretched," as she relinquished his arm, and sat down by her aunt.

"Why, Beauchamp," said Lord Malcolm, who had been following close behind him, "that hot-headed Irish lord seemed disposed to pick a quarrel with you, did he not?"

"I rather suspected something of the kind from Vernon's tutoring, as I saw those worthies in deep consultation together whilst we were dancing, and casting ominous looks towards me; and but for dear Blanche, I would have knocked that insolent lord across the room for daring to stand in her way."

"Egad, I believe you, Beauchamp," replied Malcolm; "but it won't do to talk of these things now."

"No, no, it is all over and past, and, as I have promised Mrs. Gordon never to fight a duel, we must say no more about it."

"William," said Mrs. Gordon, "you know your promise, and the penalty of breaking it?"

"Indeed I do, dear aunt, which I will never incur; and therefore, Malcolm," said Beauchamp, laughing, "I am restricted to a game of fives or cudgels, with the choice of which I will favour any man who purposely insults me."

"And I for one," added Malcolm, jocosely, "would not be in the skin of your opponent, in a ten-foot ring, for a hundred pounds, although we Scots are known to be unco fond of the siller."

"What does a game of fives mean, William?" inquired Blanche.

"This," said Beauchamp, good-humouredly, placing his clenched hand in hers; "four fingers and a thumb make a bunch of five or a fist, which is man's natural weapon of defence; but don't be alarmed, dear Blanche," he said, lowering his voice. "*I* will promise not to *fight*, if *you* will promise not to *flirt* with him, or let him make love to you."

"That he shall not do, if I can prevent it, William, rest assured."

Lord Vancourt now advanced, with a very profound bow, and Blanche rose reluctantly to take his arm, casting a lingering look behind (as she was led away), implying, "Don't you pity me?" Beauchamp felt that appeal, and instantly followed her, with Bob Conyers, who just then came up, and both stood behind her, whilst she was dancing with Lord Vancourt; and when disengaged occasionally in the dance, Beauchamp spoke a few words of encouragement.

Lord Vancourt was nettled at this interference, and bestowed a look full of malignity on Beauchamp, who returned his glance with a steady, unflinching gaze, which somewhat disconcerting his lordship, prevented an effusion of those soft speeches he had proposed for the occasion. To add more to his discomfort, also, Captain Melville now joined Conyers, and kept his eye steadily fixed on his lordship's movements. Of all in that room Lord Vancourt dreaded Melville, who was acquainted with his *peccadilloes*, and having heard him engage Miss Douglas for the next dance, feared he would enlighten her on his real position, so that he felt so ill at ease as to prove anything but agreeable to his fair partner.

The dance being concluded, Vancourt immediately led her to Mrs. Harcourt, where he thought Beauchamp or Conyers could not follow; and being offered a seat by that lady, he sat down by Blanche, hoping to prevent her dancing with Melville.

But the captain, guessing his purpose, immediately approached, notwithstanding my lord's forbidding aspect, and offered his arm, which, glad to escape from her tormentor, she readily accepted.

On walking away, Melville asked Blanche if she had known Lord Vancourt long. "No," was the reply; "I was introduced to him a short time since only, at Lord Mervyn's, when you dined there."

"What do you think of him?" he asked, rather abruptly.

"Very agreeable and entertaining," was the reply.

"Yes, all that, Miss Douglas, a finished courtier. But he is well known as the worst-tempered man, and the greatest rake about town."

"Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt have a very high opinion of him," replied Blanche.

"Because they know nothing of his real disposition or character; but when I tell you, Miss Douglas, that I declined his lordship's introduction to my own sister, you may suppose I had some good reason for this refusal. More than that, it is unnecessary for me to add."

Melville then changed the subject; and, being witty, pleasing, and friendly in his address, Blanche soon felt more at ease with him than with any stranger she had yet been introduced to. Her natural reserve gradually wore off; and she looked so pleased and happy from the music and excitement of dancing, that Melville presumed on her evident favourable feeling towards himself to ask for a second dance.

"That, I fear, is impossible, Captain Melville, as I am already engaged to more partners, than, I believe, there will be dances."

"I feared as much," he replied; "but am not the least surprised to find such is the case, although I must express my great disappointment; and, with many thanks for the most delightful dance it has ever been my good fortune to enjoy, I must now most reluctantly resign you to Mrs. Harcourt again."

"Oh, no," she said, "not to her. My aunt Gordon is expecting me on the other side of the room."

"Will you be kind enough to introduce me to her?" he asked.

"With pleasure," replied Blanche, "for I am sure you will like her."

The introduction being made, Melville remained talking to Mrs. Gordon until Markham approached to claim Miss Douglas, to whom he was engaged. Lord Vancourt had been watching Blanche's pleased expression of countenance when dancing with Captain Melville, and wreaked his vengeance by base insinuations against his character, which Mrs. Harcourt readily believed, and the more so, because he was represented as possessing nothing in the world but his pay. But Vancourt determined in his own mind that moments were now of precious importance to himself; and that he must win as much favour as possible with Mrs. Harcourt, who was his chief supporter; and he played his part accordingly, being with her the greatest part of the evening, handing her into the supper-room, and paying her every possible attention, which gratified her vanity to the greatest possible degree.

William Beauchamp, being a great favourite with the young ladies, contrived to join in almost every set with his beloved Blanche, and sat next to her and Mrs. Gordon at the supper-table, with Lord Malcolm and Constance opposite; so that they thoroughly enjoyed this little respite from their almost incessant exertions.

"Blanche," said Malcolm, "you looked fagged and tired to death already; and I hope Aunt Gordon will not allow you to dance any more to-night."

"Oh, nonsense, Charles, I shall be as fresh as ever after supper; and I have enjoyed this ball so much."

"Very well, child, as you please; but mind, Beauchamp, you take care of her, and give her half a bottle of champagne, for she looks like a ghost."

No hint of this sort was necessary, and Beauchamp had the pleasure of seeing the roses return to her cheeks on again entering the ball-room, where they were met by Lord Vancourt and Mrs. Harcourt, who expressed herself much displeased with her niece for having deserted her protection that evening. Blanche quietly replied that she had been sitting with her aunt Gordon during the intervals between the dances.

"Very well, my dear, then I expect you will remain with me now until the ball is over;" and offering her arm, Blanche was obliged to accept it. Lord Vancourt then begged for another dance, to which Blanche replied that she was engaged to Major Hammond, a friend of Captain Melville's. "I don't know him," observed Mrs. Harcourt, "and as he is not here, now the sets are formed, you cannot refuse Lord Vancourt;" who immediately offered his arm, and walked off with her.

Her dancing twice with him did not fail to elicit the usual comments, which Mrs. Harcourt was delighted to hear; and Blanche's timid looks and heightened colour, when addressed by his lordship, led many to draw inferences, the reverse of true, that Lord Vancourt was the favoured man; and sure, with his title and handsome person, to carry off the heiress.

"Ah," said Selina Markham, who was dancing with Beauchamp in the same set, "it is really a reflection upon all the young men in the country, to allow that whiskerando lord to pounce down, like a great over-grown kite amongst a timid flock of pigeons, and carry off our young heiress! What are they all thinking of? Even my brother Ned, the lifeguardsman, seems to quail beneath his look, and keeps saying, 'Eh, demmit, but what can a man do?' 'Do?' I said, 'why, demmit, Ned, pick a quarrel and shoot the fellow; or lend me the uniform, and I will do it for you.' Poor dear Blanche! with those odious Harcourts, she will be sacrificed, poor child, to that fierce-looking, rat-eyed Bonassus."

"Hush, Selina," said Beauchamp, "he will overhear you."

"So much the better," replied the wayward, high-spirited girl; "I hate him equally with Vernon, who is his great ally."

"Who is that forward, pert young lady dancing with Mr. Beauchamp?" inquired Lord Vancourt, who overheard some of her remarks.

"Miss Markham," replied Blanche.

"Who is that hook-nosed, monkey-legged fellow dancing with Miss Douglas?" asked Selina, in return, loud enough for him to hear.

"Lord Vancourt," whispered Beauchamp. "But pray, Selina, do not be so loud in your remarks."

"Eh! aw! Lord *Vain-court;* think he's well named — as Ned says, he has been paying court to every young heiress that has come out in town for the last five seasons, and cannot succeed; so now he has come down to try the provinces, eh? 'Pon honour, very condescending, indeed! with my Lord Mervyn for his bear-leader!"

"Really, Selina, if you run on in this strain, I must leave you to finish the dance by yourself."

"Very well, Will Beauchamp, a good riddance of bad company; for, what with sawneys and spooneys, the young ladies in this neighbourhood have a delightful choice of husbands!"

"In which class, pray, have I the honour of being included?"

"In the first," replied Selina; "you are a decided sawney, Will Beauchamp, and a spooney, too," she whispered, "if you allow that fellow to carry off Blanche."

"Well, Selina, don't be too severe upon a quiet, inoffensive young man, like myself," said Beauchamp, laughing.

"You are an arrant donkey, Will, I am sorry to say; I have no patience with you. You can look hard at your fences, but dare not look a pretty girl in the face."

"Well, Selina, as that is my failing, I must put on a little more brass for the future; and now, with many thanks for your hint, I must make my bow to my fair lecturer."

The more pleasantly time passes, the more quickly it fleets away; and the ball was now brought to a close by the usual country dance, in which, as agreed upon, Lord Malcolm, Constance, Beauchamp, and Blanche joined; after which, notwithstanding a little impatience exhibited by Mrs. Harcourt, our young fox-hunter persisted in cloaking and handing his fair partner to the carriage.

CHAPTER XII.

The following morning, Lords Mervyn and Vancourt, with Vernon, held a consultation on the state of affairs; and it was determined that Vancourt should write a proposal to Mr. Harcourt, the next day, for his ward.

"I think it would be best to call at Throseby," observed Lord Vancourt.

"No," said Vernon, "that will not answer the same purpose as writing—*litera scripta manet.* Get Harcourt to give his consent on black and white, and then you are safe for any contingency."

"You are quite right, Vernon," said Lord Mervyn, "and a capital adviser in such matters."

Accordingly, the next day, about the hour of luncheon, a servant was sent over on horseback from the castle, with the proposal in due form, and worded after the most approved fashion, with the usual protestations of love and devotion to the young lady.

Mr. Harcourt was in the dining-room with Blanche, Mrs. Harcourt, and Malcolm, when the letter was delivered to him; and having glanced over the contents, he put it into his pocket.

"My lord's servant is waiting for an answer, sir," said the footman.

"An answer shall be sent this afternoon," was the reply. No further comment was made on the contents of the letter until after luncheon, when Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt retired to their own private sitting-room to deliberate.

"I think, my dear," said the gentleman (after they had decided to accept his lordship's offer), "you are the most proper person to speak to Blanche on this subject, and of course can explain our wishes much better than I can—pointing out the many advantages, in point of title and connection, and pressing Blanche not to refuse so flattering a proposal."

"Indeed," replied the lady, "I cannot think my niece will act so contrary to our advice and her own interests as to refuse Lord Vancourt."

No sooner had Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt left the dining-room than Blanche, with the foreboding of evil, the influence of which no mortal can either explain or escape, turning to her cousin, said, "I wonder, Charles, what that letter from Lord Vancourt contains?"

"A proposal for your hand, dear girl—that is my impression."

"Oh, Charles," exclaimed the poor girl, almost in tears, and turning deadly pale, "what can I say?"

"Say! my dear Blanche, what you think you ought to say."

"Oh, indeed, Charles! I never could accept such a man."

"Heaven forbid you should," returned Malcolm, "for by all accounts, a worse character does not exist. Refuse him, my dear girl, point blank—no evasions or after considerations—and don't listen a moment to Mrs. Harcourt's persuasions. You don't like him, and won't marry him; stick to that, and mind, I will stick to you through thick and thin."

At this moment a servant entered, saying Mrs. Harcourt wished to see Miss Douglas in her morning-room.

"Very well," replied Malcolm, "she will be there directly. Now Blanche," said he, pouring out a glass of wine, "drink that, my dear girl, to keep up your courage; and recollect I shall be listening to hear what you say; be firm and decided, and we will take a walk together afterwards."

Poor Blanche, dreading a lecture as well as a proposal, entered her aunt's room, trembling with apprehension, and being offered a chair, was obliged to listen to the contents of Lord Vancourt's letter, with many comments thereon from Mrs. Harcourt.

"And now, my dear child," continued her aunt, most affectionately, "you will, of course, not decline such an unexceptionable offer. Lord Vancourt is so handsome, so agreeable, and talented in addition to his rank, that you really ought to feel highly flattered by the preference he has shown you, independent of his professions of deep attachment to yourself, which I am sure, from his manner, he must feel."

"Indeed, aunt," replied Blanche timidly, "I cannot accept him."

"Not accept him, Blanche? and why not?" she inquired, in well-feigned astonishment.

"Because I cannot love, or even respect him, aunt; his very looks frighten me."

"What nonsense, child! you are so timid; but all that will pass away when you have known him longer."

"I do not wish to marry yet, aunt, and never can accept Lord Vancourt;" and, notwithstanding all her aunt's entreaties, remonstrances, and even menaces of her displeasure, Blanche, emboldened by a slight cough at the door, adhered firmly to her text, and quietly, though positively, rejected his proposal; nor would she admit the hope of time (the last plank to a wrecked lover) effecting a more favourable change in his favour.

"I am really surprised at you," said Mrs. Harcourt at last, rising indignantly, "that, after all our kindness, you should show so little respect to our wishes." Blanche hastily rushed from the room, and in a moment afterwards found herself in her cousin's arms, who was waiting in the corridor.

"Now Blanche, dear," he said, kissing her flushed cheek, "run up, like a good girl, and put on your bonnet; I shall wait in the hall."

"Oh, Charles, I feel so unhappy from having displeased Aunt Harcourt that I shall remain in my room."

"You shall do no such thing, Blanche; and unless you join me in the hall within ten minutes, I will come up to your room and fetch you. I won't let you cry and fret about all this got-up humbug."

Blanche soon re-appeared, and the fresh air, with Malcolm's cheerful and cheering society, soon made her feel more composed.

"Stuff and nonsense about offending your aunt," exclaimed he. "So you are to marry to suit her convenience, are you? and swear to love and obey a man you don't care a rap about—more, positively dislike? By all that's sacred, would not such an act be absolute perjury? My dear Blanche, the very idea is horrible—positively revolting to any pure-minded woman; and if either your guardian or aunt venture on this subject with me, they shall have a lecture they will not very easily forget."

"Oh, don't say anything about it to them, Charles."

"Not unless they begin, depend upon it; but now we will talk of something else, as I feel thoroughly disgusted with the whole affair."

Whilst the two cousins were enjoying their walk, Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt were concocting their reply to Lord Vancourt, and verifying the old adage of "too many cooks spoiling the broth;" for with the lady's interference and amendments, the meaning of the letter was so ambiguous, that it might be taken either as a refusal or acceptance of his lordship's proposals. The document, however, such as it was, was at length despatched, and received by Lord Vancourt, who was sitting over the fire with Lord Mervyn and Vernon in the library, previous to dressing for dinner.

His lordship hastily broke the seal and scanned rapidly the contents—he read them a second time more carefully—turned the letter over and over, and was commencing another perusal, when Lord Mervyn asked impatiently, "What is it, Vancourt, a refusal or acceptance?"

"'Pon my life, I can scarcely tell," replied Vancourt. "There," handing it across to him, "give me your opinion, for I cannot make head or tail of it."

Lord Mervyn was equally puzzled, and handed it in turn to Vernon, saying, "There, you are a diplomatist, Vernon, and may perhaps unravel the language of this mystical compound."

Vernon, knowing the character of the writers, rightly interpreted their meaning, and said, "Here have been two heads at work with this composition. Harcourt intended it as a refusal from Miss Douglas, but the lady, having set her mind on accepting Lord Vancourt, has endeavoured to nullify his intentions, and so far has succeeded that any man may take it as an acceptance from her guardian, and in that light I should certainly recommend Lord Vancourt to consider it. The last sentence, 'That Lord Vancourt has both Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt's best wishes for his ultimate success in obtaining their niece's hand, and that no persuasions on their part *shall* be wanting to effect so desirable a consummation,' is the very admission we desired. My advice, therefore, is, that Lord Vancourt should ride over to-morrow, express his warm obligations to Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt for their friendly sentiments towards himself, and endeavour to obtain an interview with the young lady; and I doubt not, from her timidity and fear of her aunt's displeasure, such an answer may be extorted from her own lips as to be construed into an acceptance, or, at least, so Lord Vancourt will interpret it, and then what is to follow will appear almost as a natural consequence, for on one point I am thoroughly satisfied, from what I overheard mentioned by several persons in the ball-room the other night, that Lord Vancourt has not a day to spare; in fact, Melville told Bob Conyers that he was going to town the next day on purpose to collect information about the Italian and a certain person's affairs, which he was determined to communicate to Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt without delay, for he swore Miss Douglas should never marry such an impostor. Those were his words, my lord, although they must be very unpalatable for you to hear. The blacksmith, therefore, is your only chance. Independent of which, you are already blown upon by Markham, whose sister, Selina, spoke pretty plain, as she always does."

"I heard her," replied Vancourt, "and suspect, as you say, my chief dependence now is on two pair of posters and my travelling carriage."

"That is the thing, my lord—the only thing to be done under your circumstances; and having this letter in your possession from her guardian, you are as safe as the Bank of England."

The next morning, after breakfast, Mrs. Gordon drove over to see her niece, and finding her very low-spirited, inquired the cause, which poor Blanche readily confided to her kind-hearted aunt, when they were together in her own room.

"Ah, poor child! I feared Mrs. Harcourt would be worrying you to accept that bad man, for such a character Captain Melville gave Mr. Conyers of him, declaring he would go to London directly and get evidence to prove all he said; and now, my dear Blanche, you shall return with me to the Priory for a few days, to recruit your spirits and escape further importunities."

"Oh, dear aunt! I shall be so delighted if you will take me with you."

"That I certainly will, my love; so get Alice to pack up your things, whilst I go down-stairs and speak to Mrs. Harcourt, for go with me you shall."

Any one of my readers who has witnessed the meeting of two strange cats, with arched backs, and fire darting from their eye-balls, spitting and swearing as a preliminary to scratching and tearing the fleck out of each other's bodies, may form some idea of the rencontre between the two aunts, when brought into hostile collision about their niece.

"So, Mrs. Harcourt," exclaimed Aunt Gordon, on entering the drawing-room, "you have been worrying poor Blanche to accept that good-for-nothing man, Lord Vancourt."

"Good-for-nothing man, Mrs. Gordon! what do you mean?"

"That he is a worthless, gambling, penniless fortune-hunter, and already married, or entangled with an opera dancer. To encourage such a man for my niece is unpardonable, Mrs. Harcourt."

"It is unpardonable in you, Mrs. Gordon," retorted the other, "to utter such a false, scandalous libel against his lordship, who is a person of unblemished character, of well-known good fortune, and of the highest and most honourable feelings. But who is his base slanderer, Mrs. Gordon? His name I have a right to know, as we have approved Lord Vancourt's proposals, allowing Blanche due time for consideration."

"My information is derived through Mr. Conyers from Captain Melville, who has known Lord Vancourt for some years, and he is now gone to London to obtain the necessary proof of what he has asserted, as Mr. Conyers questioned the truth of these reports. His last words to him were—'As you doubt my word, I engage to return at the end of a week, and prove Lord Vancourt an impostor, or forfeit my honour as a gentleman.' Having spoken this in a public ball-room, Captain Melville must (holding a commission in the army) maintain or retract his assertions; and, in the meantime, under these unpleasant circumstances, Blanche will find it more comfortable at the Priory than here, where, of course (after your sanction to his addresses), Lord Vancourt will be calling again."

Mrs. Harcourt, feeling alarmed at these revelations, and thinking that perhaps she had been too precipitate in the affair, raised no further objections to Blanche's return with Mrs. Gordon, and within half an hour they were in her carriage on the road to the Priory, Lord Malcolm promising to ride over after luncheon and dine with them.

Malcolm had scarcely disappeared through the lower lodge gates of Throseby, before Lord Vancourt entered by the upper. He was rather more formally received by the lady of the mansion than he expected, which, notwithstanding all his complimentary speeches and expressions of deep obligation for Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt's most flattering approval of his proposals, did not wear away.

"May I hope," inquired his lordship, in the most deferential tone, "for a short interview with Miss Douglas, as I have not had the opportunity of making my proposal to her in person?"

"She left us this morning to remain with her aunt, Mrs. Gordon, for a week," was the reply.

Lord Vancourt bit his lip at this intelligence, and looked exceedingly mortified, which Mrs. Harcourt noticing, said—

"Your lordship must have gathered from Mr. Harcourt's letter that we had failed to obtain the consent of Miss Douglas to receive your addresses."

"Indeed! I did not so interpret its contents," replied Lord Vancourt, "but was induced to think a personal interview with your niece might have led to a better understanding between us, and a confirmation of my most sanguine hopes."

"At present," replied Mrs. Harcourt, "Miss Douglas would, I am quite sure, decline such an interview, although time may possibly effect some change in her sentiments."

"Am I to consider, then," inquired Lord Vancourt, "this as my final answer, that Miss Douglas positively declines my future addresses?"

"Oh, dear, no!" replied Mrs. Harcourt (fearing she was now verging on the other extreme, and taking Mrs. Gordon's communications for granted); "we shall be most happy to receive you here as usual on my niece's return, although, from her natural shyness of character, too much precipitation on your lordship's part would produce the contrary effect to that which you have our best wishes to accomplish."

With many thanks for this friendly concession, Lord Vancourt politely took his leave, leaving Mrs. Harcourt in a most unenviable state of mind, doubting whether she had said too much or too little. On Mr. Harcourt's return, the occurrences of the day were duly retailed, and that worthy gentleman began to doubt his own want of proper precaution in not first investigating Lord Vancourt's affairs, merely relying on Lord Mervyn's representations.

"We have been too hasty, my dear," observed Mr. Harcourt; "and I now truly regret having penned that letter, chiefly at your dictation."

"Oh, it is of little consequence," returned his spouse; "Blanche does not like him, and so ends the business, since with her fortune there will be no lack of suitors."

Poor Blanche, when safe at the Priory, felt like a bird escaped from its cage, and her happiness was increased by the arrival of Malcolm and Bob Conyers to dinner, the latter dropping in quite unexpectedly. Great indignation was expressed (when the servants withdrew) by Malcolm and Conyers at the Harcourts' indelicate behaviour to Blanche, in which Aunt Gordon heartily concurred; and all three having declared their resolution to prevent a repetition of such improper influence being again exercised over her, the subject was discontinued, and the events at the ball substituted. Leaving this happy party by the fireside, we must now look in at Marston Castle.

CHAPTER XIII.

About the same hour, seated in the dining-room at Marston, after the ladies had retired, were Lords Mervyn and Vancourt, discussing with Vernon their future plans of operation.

"It is quite evident," remarked Vernon, "from Mrs. Harcourt's altered tone to Lord Vancourt, coupled with Miss Douglas's retreat to the Priory, that some person (most probably Mrs. Gordon) has thrown out strong hints, if nothing more, about his lordship's position, and this week's delay may bring many things to light. Melville thinks the heiress is decidedly taken with him, and, to confess the truth, she gave some cause for encouragement the night of the ball, and he will rake London over to establish certain reports about Lord Vancourt. The time for deliberation is past. Is it now your intention, my lord, to act or retreat?"

"Certainly not the latter!" replied Lord Vancourt, grinding his teeth with passion. "I will be revenged on Melville and the whole set, Conyers, Beauchamp, and Gordon; nothing shall turn me from my purpose now."

"To-morrow, then," said Vernon, "we must make our arrangements '*sub Jove frigido*,' since walls, doors, and wainscots in this house seem to have ears; there is a traitor among us somewhere, of which I am well convinced; but we have spies in the enemy's camp also, who will give us all the information we require."

The week had expired, and Mrs. Harcourt's carriage was ordered to bring Miss Douglas back from the Priory, about ten o'clock in the evening, after a small party there; when Mark Rosier suddenly made his appearance at Bampton, about nine o'clock, and jumping from a horse he had borrowed of a farmer, rushed into the servants' hall.

"Where is Mr. William?" he inquired, in breathless haste, of his friend, John, the footman.

"In the drawing-room," was the reply.

"Quick then, John, and whisper in his ear, 'Mark must see him this moment'—lose not a second."

The message was delivered, and Beauchamp, springing from his chair, instantly darted from the room. Mark met him in the passage. "Quick, sir," he said, in a low voice. "Your pistols, or Miss Blanche is lost!"

"Get my horse, Mark, and one for yourself, saddled directly, and I will run down to the stable-yard."

In five minutes, Beauchamp had put on a strong dark-coloured shooting jacket, with two brace of pistols in his pockets, and was galloping with Mark Rosier up the ride leading to the lodge gate. "Now, Mark, tell me what has happened, as we go along—where is Miss Douglas?"

"At the Priory, sir, I hope, yet; but Mrs. Harcourt's carriage is sent to take her home at ten; and that d——d rascally lord has got his travelling chariot, with four posters, waiting on the common, to intercept and carry her off to Scotland."

"How do you know this, Mark?"

"The ostler at Cherrington, sir, is an old friend of mine, and told me all about the horses being ordered, and fresh relays bespoke on the North Road; and Tom Carter, my lord's footman, fished out something about it, too, and ran out to my hiding-place, behind the castle (where I have been the last three nights, from dark till nearly daylight), about six o'clock this evening, telling me he overheard the valet and Lord Vancourt saying something about Marston Common, at ten o'clock to-night. 'They are off, Mark,' said he, 'trunks packed and all, and you haven't a minute to spare;' so, sir, I ran down to the village, where my partners were, ordered them to go to the steep hill beyond the common, with their air-guns, and hide themselves behind the hedge, to knock over the leading horses, and rescue the young lady, if we did not arrive in time."

"Well done, Mark," exclaimed Beauchamp. "Here, take these two pistols, but don't use them, unless obliged to do so, to save your life; now come along," as, setting spurs to his horse, Beauchamp rode rapidly on towards the Priory. "Quick, to the back door, Mark, and learn of the servants if the carriage has left with Miss Douglas; if it has, give a whistle, and follow me as fast as you can; I shall keep on the road."

In a few minutes the shrill whistle of the poacher was heard, piercing through the house, even to where Mrs. Gordon was sitting. At the signal, Beauchamp almost flew along, at such a pace that Mark strove in vain to overtake him.

We must now relate what was occurring to Blanche Douglas, who, accompanied by her maid, Alice, had left the Priory in Mrs. Harcourt's carriage, about twenty minutes before Beauchamp's calling there. They had proceeded about three miles; the night, although very misty, was (from the moon beginning to rise) sufficiently light to distinguish objects in passing, when Alice, who was looking through the window, suddenly exclaimed—"The coachman has passed the turning-off to Throseby, miss, and is driving on towards the common."

"Good heavens!" replied Blanche, "where can he be going to? Quick, Alice, put your head out of the window, and ask him."

She had just done so, when the carriage stopped on the edge of the common, near a clump of beech trees, and Vancourt's valet, coming to the door, said Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt had dined, and were going to stay the night at the castle, and had sent Lord Mervyn's carriage to meet her there; the other being ordered to return home, and come to Marston in the morning.

Blanche, being greatly surprised at this information, was hesitating how to act, when Mr. Harcourt's coachman said, "It's all right, miss, you may depend."

"Now, ma'am, quick, if you please," again interposed the valet; "I hear some farmers riding this way from market, and we are blocking up the road."

Still poor Blanche hesitated, having an instinctive dread of some evil impending over her.

"Stay till the farmers have passed!" quickly whispered Alice to her mistress.

"We shall be run over," exclaimed the valet, "if you don't come directly, ma'am."

"Stay one minute longer, my dear young lady," again whispered her faithful servant, "I'm sure there's something wrong."

At this instant Beauchamp reached the scene, and, riding furiously up to the carriage, asked, in a stern voice, "What are you doing here, you scoundrels?"

The same story was again quickly repeated by coachman and valet, when Beauchamp exclaimed to the former, "Turn your horses' heads, this instant, back to the Priory, or I'll send this bullet," drawing a pistol, "through your treacherous brains; and you, my Lord Vancourt's valet, are my prisoner," said Beauchamp, seizing him by the collar.

"Not if I can prevent it," said Lord Vancourt, suddenly presenting himself. "How dare you, sir, touch my servant, or interfere between Miss Douglas and her guardian's orders? She shall return to Marston Castle, even if force is necessary."

"Ha! ha!" shouted Mark, who had just reached the spot, "To Marston Castle, indeed; you mean Gretna Green! ha! ha! caught, my Lord Vancourt! caught at last!"

"Stand aside," said Beauchamp, jumping on the ground, and attempting to close the carriage door. "Miss Douglas is under my protection now."

"She is not, and never shall be," exclaimed Vancourt, vehemently, thrusting him violently away; and seizing Blanche by the arm, he tried to drag her forth.

"Villain!" shouted Beauchamp, now thoroughly roused, "take that for your insolence;" and he felled him with his fist, instantly, to the ground. At the same moment, Mark, putting his fingers to his mouth, sent forth a whistle, which echoed far through hill and dale, making the horses almost spring out of their harness.

"Hold them tight, Job," cried Mark to Mr. Harcourt's coachman; "you don't move without the squire, mind, again to-night, or it shall be your last move on earth. Keep your box and sit still, or I'll knock you out of it, as I would a pheasant from his roost."

Lord Vancourt, recovering his feet, instantly levelled his pistol and fired, without effect, at Beauchamp, who, returning the compliment, shot Lord Vancourt through the left arm, breaking the bone above the elbow.

"Look out, sir!" shouted Mark, "here's more of the blackguards coming on," as three men rushed down upon them, who were soon in fierce conflict hand to hand, Mark plying his cudgel so effectually as to knock the foremost instantly off his legs, and Beauchamp conferring a similar favour on the next with the muzzle of his pistol; when the third, fearing the fate of his companions, drew his pistol and shot Beauchamp through the fleshy part of his body, under the shoulder blade. He staggered, but did not fall; and Mark, receiving at the same time a dig in the back from the dagger of the valet, smarting and rendered savage by the pain, shot Beauchamp's antagonist through the body. Meanwhile, Lord Vancourt, disabled but not subdued, with his right hand renewed his efforts to drag Miss Douglas from the carriage. Assisted by Alice, she was resisting with her utmost strength, when Beauchamp dealt him a blow on the face, which broke his nose and sent him staggering into the road.

"Quick, my lord!" cried the valet, catching him in his arms and dragging him to his chariot, "I hear men running down the road. All is lost—quick! or we shall be made prisoners!"

The hint was enough; the valet shut his master in, and springing on the box, the four horses bore them rapidly away from the scene of their disaster. The other poachers rushed quickly to the rescue of their leader, who was still grappling with one of his assailants, and the affair was soon brought to a close, although the issue of the combat, with heavy odds against them, had been determined already by the courage and prowess of Mark and the young squire, who fought like lions robbed of their prey.

"Now, Mark," said Beauchamp, "let your fellows hold these villains in custody, whilst I go to Miss Douglas."

Poor Blanche sat trembling in the carriage from excessive fright, almost unconscious of what was going on, when Beauchamp, opening the door, said, "Thank Heaven, you are safe, dearest Blanche! Lord Vancourt has fled, and the poachers have secured the rest."

By the sudden transition from fright to joy, with other tumultuous feelings rushing through her heart, Blanche fell back on the seat fainting, when Alice cried out, "Quick, Mr. Beauchamp—support her in your arms whilst I get some salts from my pocket." In a moment her head was resting on his breast, while her maid was applying restoratives, which soon roused her from her swoon.

"Oh, where am I?" she faintly asked.

"Safe, my dear girl, in Will Beauchamp's arms," was the soft reply; "are you afraid of him, dear Blanche?" as she struggled to rise.

"Oh, no, dear William—my kind, my noble preserver; but I am better now; let us return to dear Aunt Gordon."

"That you shall, directly; I will be with you again in a moment."

Ordering Mark to bring the prisoners with the horses to the Priory, and telling the coachman to drive back there immediately, Beauchamp entered the carriage; and Alice, saying she would rather be outside to see they did not take a wrong turn again, left the lovers together, and got up behind with the footman, who had all the time been standing at the horses' heads, to prevent their running away during the fight.

As they sat side by side, the blood from Beauchamp's wound trickled down on Blanche's arm, who, feeling the moisture, raised it to the light of the lamp. "Good heavens, William!" she exclaimed, turning pale, and in great alarm, "you are bleeding! oh, tell me where you are hurt!"

"Only a scratch, dear girl. Don't look so frightened—I assure you it is nothing of consequence!"

"Oh, what can I do for you, dear William?" she exclaimed, still in great terror.

"Nothing, dearest Blanche, but this—if you really love me, may I have one kiss, which will heal all my wounds?"

No reply being given, Beauchamp strained her to his heart, whispering, "Oh, how thankful I am for this reward, dear Blanche! and for having saved you from such a fate."

"How thankful ought I to feel to you, dear William, for risking your life to protect me from that dreadful man!"

They had now reached the Priory, when, at the sound of the wheels, all the servants, with Mrs. Gordon also, rushed to the hall door in a body, having been terrified by Mark's sudden appearance at the back door an hour before, and fearing some dreadful work was going on, from the distant report of fire-arms which had been heard even at the Priory.

When the steps were let down, Beauchamp handed Blanche from the carriage, who, throwing herself into her aunt's arms, burst into tears, sobbing convulsively on her bosom.

"My dear, dear child," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, trembling with apprehension, "what frightful thing has happened? Your dress is covered with blood! Where are you injured, my dearest love?"

"Oh, nowhere, dearest aunt! I am not injured—but poor William"—bursting again into tears—"is, I fear, badly wounded. It is the blood from his side. Pray attend to him, and do not regard me."

"Run then to the dining-room, dear Blanche, with Alice, and get some wine directly, while I bring him there. Now, William," said Mrs. Gordon, taking him by the arm, "what can have happened? And where are you hurt, my dear boy? You look faint and exhausted."

"Only a crack on the ribs, dear aunt," replied Beauchamp, smiling, "from that scoundrel Vancourt, who tried to carry off Blanche—nothing more; and a little bleeding will do me good after this hot, exciting work."

"Don't be foolish, William. A glass of wine will do you most good at present. So come with me, and then I must examine your wound, whilst you tell me more of this horrid outrage."

Saying which, she led him into the dining-room, and made him lie down on the sofa, where Blanche brought him a glass of wine, trembling still, and shaking so much that she spilt half of it on the floor.

"Drink it yourself, dear Blanche," said Beauchamp, springing up, "and another, too, or I will not touch a drop. Sit down, my dear girl. I am not much hurt." Saying which, he poured her out a full glass, which he made her take, and then filling one himself, said, before raising it to his lips, "Here's health and long life to Mark Rosier, the poacher, who has saved dear Blanche from that rascally lord's clutches!"

"Now, dear child," said Mrs. Gordon, "run up-stairs, and change your dress, whilst I order tea to be taken into the drawing-room."

CHAPTER XIV.

As soon as she had left the room, Beauchamp was obliged to take off his coat and waistcoat and submit to Mrs. Gordon's inspection, who cutting a strip from under his arm, laid bare the wound. "Indeed, William," she exclaimed, "it is a shocking bad place. I must send for the surgeon."

"Oh, pray don't, dear aunt! I do not think there is any occasion."

"It must and shall be done instantly, and I will do what I can in the meantime."

Saying which, she rang the bell and gave orders accordingly; and, running from the room, soon returned with her maid, who brought hot water and bandages, with which, after due fomentations, Beauchamp's side was carefully bound up.

"Now, dear aunt," he said, "after all your kind care and trouble, I feel quite refreshed and easy. Let us join Blanche for a cup of tea, and you shall hear the whole story of this night's adventures, as far as I know myself."

Lying on the sofa, near the fire, by Aunt Gordon's directions, Beauchamp was waited upon by Blanche, who placed a small table by his side, and her attention was more than repaid by his happy smile, when receiving these kind offices from her hands.

All he knew was related to Mrs. Gordon, who frequently interrupted him by exclamations of anger or surprise at this most daring outrage.

"And now, dear aunt," said Beauchamp, "if you will be kind enough to give me pen and paper, to write a few lines to

Constance and my father, who must be alarmed at my absence, I shall be much obliged."

"That I will do for you, William; so remain quiet where you are."

The letter was accordingly written and despatched immediately.

"That reminds me that I ought to apprise Mrs. Harcourt also of the events of this night, and the conduct of her *protegé*, Lord Vancourt; although I am resolved, after this disgraceful affair, Blanche shall not again return to Throseby."

"Oh, dear aunt!" exclaimed Blanche, "can you—will you keep me with you?"

"Yes, my love, I can and will do so, being your guardian equally with Mr. Harcourt."

A servant at this moment entered the room, to say that Mr. Harcourt's coachman had run away, leaving the carriage and horses in the stable-yard.

"Run away, did you say?" asked Mrs. Gordon in amazement.

"Yes, ma'am," replied the man; "and Robert the footman says he thinks he was bribed by Lord Vancourt to drive Miss Douglas to meet his lordship's carriage on the common."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, "what a villain! you may go, John, and send the footman to me."

"Please, sir," said the man, addressing Beauchamp, "Mark Rosier wants to speak to you."

"Then send him here," replied Mrs. Gordon, "for Mr. Beauchamp shall not leave the sofa."

The tall, athletic, handsome poacher was soon ushered into the drawing-room, where he stood near the door, with a low bow to the ladies.

"Come here, Mark," cried Beauchamp, extending his hand, which the poacher seized and pressed to his lips; "you are a brave, honest fellow; and to your courage this night am I indebted for my life, and the safety of Miss Douglas. My gratitude for this service will end only with my own existence."

"Master William," said Mark, "I loved you when a boy, and have had much more cause to love you since I became a man, and I would willingly lay down my life to serve you at any time. But what's the matter, sir? where were you wounded by that rascally lord?"

"He missed me, Mark, but the other villain you knocked over shot me through the fleshy part over the ribs."

"Let me see, sir," said Mark, kneeling down by the sofa; "I have known something about gunshot wounds before today."

"It is all right," said Beauchamp; "Mrs. Gordon has kindly fomented and bound it up; besides, Mark," he whispered, "there are ladies in the room."

"I beg pardon, sir," said the poacher, rising, "but I was only thinking of you."

"Now, Mark," said Mrs. Gordon, leading up Blanche, "it is our turn to thank you, my kind friend, for your valuable assistance this night;" and both shook him cordially by the hand.

"Welcome, right welcome, ladies," replied Mark, "and glad am I to see that dear young lady once more happy and safe; but, my lady, it were a near thing—that long-legged lord were just a-going to drag Miss Blanche from the carriage, when the young squire (God bless him!) knocked him off his pins like a babby, and shut the door. Then up jumps my lord, and let fly a bullet at Mr. William, which (the Lord be praised for it!) missed un clean. The squire then broke his arm—sarved him right—and with another rattler in the face, sent my Lord Longlegs spinning across the road; and I'll wager a pound he remembers the young squire to his dying day. So you see, my lady, it warn't Mark, but Mr. William, that saved Miss Blanche from being half way on her road to Scotland by this time."

"There, Mark, that will do," interposed Beauchamp; "now sit down, and Miss Blanche will give you a cup of tea; and tell me about your own wound in the back."

"Ah, sir, that foreign coward thought he had me there nicely, but the velveteen and badger waistcoat stood my friends, and it's only a scratch after all—not half so bad as yours, sir. But what d'ye think, squire? dang it all! our three prisoners are my Lord Mervyn's night watchers."

"What, Mark!" exclaimed Beauchamp.

"As true as you be lying on that sofa, sir; we knowed 'em directly we got to the light, sir; and one on 'em, that chap that shot you, squire, has got something in his carcass, which don't quite agree with un quite so well as a figgy pudding."

"I hope he's not seriously hurt, though, Mark, and that he has been attended to?"

"Yes, yes, squire; don't fidget about him, for all the servants in the house have been waiting on and pitying the rascal, and we can't do more till the doctor comes; and then to think, squire, that Mr. Job, the coachman, should have been in the plot, and sell his young mistress for fifty pounds! he has cut it, sir, already, and left Robert to drive the carriage home; so altogether, squire, what with my lord's under-keepers, and Mr. Harcourt's coachman, there's a pretty kettle of fish boiled up to-night."

"Can all this be really true, Mark?" inquired Mrs. Gordon in surprise.

"As true, my lady, as that Mark Rosier is sitting down drinking tea and eating bread and butter in this chair."

"Oh, Blanche! my darling child," exclaimed her aunt, folding her again in her arms, "what a set of villains have been plotting your ruin! and Lord Mervyn, too, with a daughter of his own. Poor dear child! you shall never leave me any more."

"That's right, my lady," chimed in Mark, "don't ever trust that dear, sweet angel out of your sight again, unless with the young squire; or who knows, that rascally lord may send another lot of ruffians down to carry her off again; don't let her go to Throseby no more, ma'am, for here Mark and the poachers will watch over her day and night."

"Really, Mark! after this fearful work, I think I must retain you and two of your men as my body-guard."

"So you shall, my lady; and we will enter on our service to-morrow, and woe betide any half-dozen fellows who dare touch Miss Blanche again."

A ring at the hall bell was now heard, on which Mark, jumping up from his chair, said, "That's the doctor, ladies; and with many thanks for your kindness, I will run off and see how my patient fares."

Mr. Morgan, the sporting surgeon, now made his appearance; and after paying his compliments to the ladies, turned to shake hands with Beauchamp.

"Well, squire," said the good humoured doctor, "because you could not be hunting, you have been doing a little bit of fighting during the frost, eh?"

"Not willingly, doctor; but first step into the servants' hall, there's a worse case there—mine will keep. After that, I will go with you into the dining-room, where you can examine my scratch."

"Well, as you please," replied Morgan, "if Mrs. Gordon has no objection."

"William appears much easier now," she said; "and as he wishes it, perhaps you had better go there first."

The doctor soon returned, telling Mrs. Gordon, with a very grave face, that the man was dangerously wounded by a ball through his body, although he believed no vital part had been injured; yet that he required great care and attention, and ought immediately to be placed in bed.

"Do exactly as you consider best," replied Mrs. Gordon, "and tell the housekeeper to have everything prepared for him without delay."

"Thank you, my dear madam, for your kindness," said Morgan, as he again left the room; when Malcolm rushed in, with consternation depicted on his face, and instantly folded Blanche in his embrace, exclaiming, "My poor, dear girl! what an escape you have had from that villain! But, Will Beauchamp, are you much hurt, my brave, noble fellow? I heard the whole account from Harcourt's footman."

"Oh, not much, Malcolm, as you may see, by my enjoying a cup of tea."

The story was again told, when Malcolm said—

"Upon my word! what with Lord Mervyn's keepers, and Mr. Harcourt's coachman, this is a most serious affair, and I will have it sifted to the bottom."

"Perhaps," suggested Mrs. Gordon, "for dear Blanche's sake, we had better let it pass as quiet as possible, and keep a strict watch over her for the future."

"And allow these villains to escape exposure! But, besides, dear aunt, Lord Mervyn would assuredly take advantage of our weakness, and say the matter was hushed up by mutual consent; that Blanche was a consenting party to an elopement with Lord Vancourt, and which, he would assert, was only prevented by Beauchamp's interference—and this Lord Vancourt reported to be a married man! My dear aunt, you must see, Blanche's fair fame would be tarnished for ever by such an insinuation even. No, no! it's impossible to compromise this business; and I am resolved, for the honour of both our families—my cousin's and my own—that a thorough investigation shall take place. It is my province, as one of her nearest relatives, to clear her from all complicity or connivance with Lord Vancourt; and, my dear aunt, it must and shall be done!"

"Well, Charles, I believe you take the right view of the case, which is too serious to be passed over; but I think Mr. Harcourt will endeavour to hush it up on account of his friend, Lord Mervyn, and to screen himself, as his servant was concerned also."

"No doubt, aunt; but half a score Harcourts and Mervyns shall not prevent me discharging my duty to dear Blanche, and protecting her fair name from pollution with such a man as Vancourt."

Mr. Morgan put a stop to further conversation by just then returning to the drawing-room.

"Now, squire," he said, "it is your turn, as my other patient is as comfortable as he has any right to expect, if you and Lord Malcolm will walk with me into the other room."

Mrs. Gordon looking anxious, and Blanche pale, at this announcement, from fear of Beauchamp's being subjected to more pain, Morgan assured them they need not be alarmed; adding, with a smile—

"Rest satisfied, ladies; I will not hurt him for my own sake, as I don't want to be double-thonged when he gets into the saddle once more;" with which the three gentlemen walked off together.

After examining and probing the wound, which caused Will Beauchamp to wince a little, Morgan expressed his opinion that rest and quiet must be observed for some few days; and added—

"You may thank your lucky star, or guardian angel, that the ball struck your rib on the centre, my young friend, or you had been past all surgical aid. It's a confounded rascally business, altogether; and I hope, my lord," turning to Malcolm, "you won't let that old fox-killer up at the castle escape probing a little."

"You may depend, doctor, I won't spare him or any concerned in this outrage. And now let us return to the ladies, as I saw their anxious looks."

Morgan assured Mrs. Gordon she need be under no alarm on Beauchamp's account, whose wound would heal in a few days; but that he ought not to return home that night, and take only gruel or tea till he saw him again in the morning.

"Ah, my dear aunt!" exclaimed Malcolm, when the door had closed on Morgan, "Beauchamp has had a very narrow escape; and thankful must we all be to the Almighty that he has been spared to us."

"My dear, dear boy," said Aunt Gordon, affected to tears, and going up and kissing him, "what should I have done without you? And now you are dearer to me than ever."

"Pray don't give way thus, dear aunt," whispered Beauchamp; "you will distress poor Blanche, who, I see, is ready to cry, and she has had enough to-night to agitate her; but let her bring me another cup of tea, as I feel rather thirsty."

"Come, Blanche, don't you follow the example of your foolish old aunt, but take this to William."

As she handed Beauchamp the cup, he held her hand for a moment, saying, "Dear Blanche, how many will envy Will Beauchamp's scratch this night, which has given him such a cup-bearer! and how forcibly does your kind attention remind me of those beautiful lines of Scott:—

> 'Oh, woman! in our hours of ease,
> Uncertain, coy, and hard to please,
> * * * * *
> When pain and anguish wring the brow,
> A ministering angel thou!'"

The last word had scarcely passed his lips, when a carriage was driven furiously up to the hall door, and a voice heard shouting—

"Let me out! Open the door!"

"There's no mistaking that voice!" exclaimed Malcolm, darting from the room. "It is the old squire."

"How is my dear boy?" inquired Mr. Beauchamp, as he met Malcolm in the hall.

"Not much the matter, my dear sir, as he is lying on the sofa, drinking tea, and quoting poetry."

"Quick! where is he?" he said to Malcolm, who was now speaking to Constance.

"In the drawing-room; here, this way——"

And in a moment, Mr. Beauchamp, regardless of the ladies, was kneeling by his son, ejaculating—

"Thank God! thank God! the Father of all mercies, that you are spared to me, my own darling boy."

And the old man burst into a flood of tears, still repeating his thanks to God for preserving his son's life. Constance, throwing herself into Blanche's arms, gave vent also to her pent-up feelings, which she had repressed to keep up her father; but now the tears of all three ladies fell uncontrolled, and even Malcolm was obliged to turn aside to conceal his emotion at witnessing this affecting interview between father and son.

"Come, come, my dear father," at length said Beauchamp, "this agitation hurts my side; and you have not yet spoken a word to dear, kind Mrs. Gordon or Blanche."

The old man rose slowly from his knees, and going up to

Mrs. Gordon, took her hand in his, which he held for some time, but all utterance failed him.

"I can't thank you now," he at last said, as the tears still rolled down his cheek; "and poor Blanche!" whose hand he next seized, "thank Heaven! you are saved, dear child, from a fate worse than death!"

"Oh, Mr. Beauchamp," she sobbed; "I am the wretched cause of all your grief. What would I not give to save William one moment's pain?"

"Would you give this, dear girl?" he whispered, in a low tone, pressing her hand in his, "to make my poor boy happy?"

"Yes," she said, softly, and blushing deeply; "all I possess in the world."

"The wound in his side," said Mr. Beauchamp, "will, I trust, yield to the doctor's skill; but he has another, I suspect, which only this little hand can heal. Come with me, then, my own dear child, and be Will's comforter."

Saying which, he led her to the sofa; and, placing her hand in that of his son, said, in a whisper—

"There, Will; that will heal all your wounds; and may the Almighty bless you both."

"Oh, Blanche," murmured Beauchamp, as he pressed her hand to his lips, "how far beyond all my fondest hopes is this reward! but, dearest, I must not claim it now, when you are overpowered with gratitude."

"Will you refuse, then," she said, softly, "to make me happy?"

"No, no, my own dearest girl; not if love only prompts you to bestow this unlooked-for blessing on me. Is it so, dear Blanche?"

"Yes," was the faint response.

"Then am I blessed indeed," replied Beauchamp; "and now, dearest, you have been so excited to-night, I hope you will retire to your room with Constance. I shall quickly follow your example, as I know Aunt Gordon is gone to order beds for us."

During this scene, Mrs. Gordon and Malcolm had silently left the apartment, leaving Mr. Beauchamp and Constance only with the two lovers. The former now appeared, saying, "I have ordered a double-bedded room, Mr. Beauchamp, for you and William, as I knew you would not like to leave him to-night; and the tray to be brought in directly, with something more substantial than tea. And now, dear William, you must go with me to your room, where Malcolm is preparing everything for your comfort, with a large basin of gruel, which he declares none but a Scotchman can make."

"Oh, very well," cried Mr. Beauchamp, gaily, ; "then you are going to desert me entirely, I conclude?"

"Only for a short time, as Charles will join you directly, who declares he is as ravenous as one of his own mountain eagles. Now, children," continued Mrs. Gordon, as she led Beauchamp out of the room; "kiss your father, Constance, and follow me." In a moment she was in her father's arms, and when released from his embrace, Blanche held out her hand to wish him good night. "No, dear child; that will not do now—come to my heart. I have found another daughter, and you a father, if you can love me as such."

"Oh, indeed I will," she replied.

"God bless you, my own dear Blanche," murmured the old squire, as he pressed her in his arms, and kissed her again and again. "There, child, now run away; you and Will have made a woman of me to-night."

On the landing-place, Beauchamp waited to wish his sister good-night, where he was left a few minutes by Mrs. Gordon; and having pressed her to his breast in a warm embrace, Blanche tripped up the stairs, and was in his arms before she was aware of the act, when, hastily impressing a kiss upon her lips, he whispered, "God bless you, my dearest treasure; I shall now rest the happiest of the happy."

"William," cried Mrs. Gordon, from the end of the gallery, "why don't you come to your room?"

"Coming directly, dear aunt;" with which he turned away.

CHAPTER XV.

The next morning Mr. Morgan paid an early visit to his two patients, whom he found progressing as favourably as he could expect, although the watcher could not be considered out of danger for some few days. "Do you think, doctor, I shall ever get over it?" asked the sufferer.

"I hope so," replied Morgan, "although there's no saying how it may turn; but keep a good heart, and make a clean breast from last night's work and all your other transgressions.

Mrs. Gordon's kindness to you, and your narrow escape from murdering the young squire, demand a full confession of all you know about this infernal business. Out with it—a clear conscience makes an easy bed, and you will feel all the better for it."

"It shall be done, doctor," said the man, "let the consequences be what they may!"

Blanche Douglas was so fevered from the fright and excitement of the previous night, as to be unable to leave her room until late in the day. After eleven o'clock, visitors began to pour in from the neighbourhood; the news of Blanche's attempted abduction having spread like wildfire. Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt drove over to the Priory immediately after breakfast, and were loud in their expressions of astonishment at Lord Vancourt's conduct.

"And what could you expect," asked Mrs. Gordon, "after making such a fuss with that good-for-nothing man, and accepting him as my niece's suitor without making the least inquiry about his character or connections? I am quite surprised at *you*, Mr. Harcourt, acting so rashly; who, as her guardian, were bound to make the strictest investigation into the affairs of any stranger who proposed for your ward's hand!"

"I confess," replied Mr. Harcourt, "I trusted too much to Lord Mervyn's representations; but although Lord Vancourt has acted so precipitately in this matter, yet there is no proof that he is such a character as you represent him to be."

"That proof will not be long wanting," retorted Mrs. Gordon.

"We need not now enter into these discussions," replied Mr. Harcourt, "as we have come to take Blanche home."

"Her home," said Mrs. Gordon, "for the future, will be at the Priory; or at least until such time as the fullest inquiry is made into this business, which Lord Malcolm is determined to prosecute to the utmost."

"And, pray, what has Lord Malcolm to do with it, Mrs. Gordon? I am her guardian, and the proper person to act in her defence."

"You cannot be surprised, Mr. Harcourt, that Lord Malcolm should entertain some doubts on that head, when he finds your own coachman implicated in the attempted abduction of his cousin, as well as Lord Mervyn's under-keepers, who are now in custody. In short, under these circumstances, Lord Malcolm, as her nearest relative, has resolved that Blanche shall remain under my protection, as I also am her guardian; but should you think proper to question our authority for so acting, last night's transactions shall be laid before the Lord Chancellor, and we do not fear the result."

"Oh! I suppose," said Mrs. Harcourt, sneeringly, "Mrs. Gordon intends to keep her niece here to marry her favourite, Mr. Beauchamp."

"Even if I did," replied Mrs. Gordon, "it would not be quite so bad as conniving at her being carried away by a married man!"

"Lord Vancourt is not a married man, and I defy you to the proof, madam!"

"Here it is, then," exclaimed Melville, who had entered the room with Bob Conyers, and heard the last sentence. "Here is a copy of the marriage certificate of Edward, Lord Vancourt, and Signora Marinetta, solemnised at Florence five years ago, and duly attested by witnesses. I have seen the original from which this is taken, and have already written to a friend at Florence to send me all further particulars."

"And what business is this of yours, sir?" demanded Mrs. Harcourt, rising in great indignation from her chair.

"It became *my* business, madam," replied Melville, "when *my word* was questioned the other night by Lord Vancourt at the ball, and it shall be my business still, to prove him what I then asserted he was—a married man."

"Oh, very well, sir," said the lady, ringing the bell violently for her carriage; "but you shall not marry my niece, notwithstanding."

"Were I so disposed," replied the captain, "I should not be obliged, after what occurred last night, to obtain your consent;" at which the lady bounced out of the room into the hall, followed by her husband, where she remained until the carriage came round.

"Now, Aunt Gordon," said Conyers, "as that worthy pair have decamped—where is Will Beauchamp?"

"In the blue room up-stairs with Malcolm, having leeches applied to his side; but mind, Robert, you do not excite him by talking too much, as Mr. Morgan says there is much inflammation about his wound, and he must be kept quiet."

"You need not fear me," replied Bob, "and, in the meantime, Melville will tell you more of last night's adventures, and Vernon's elopement with Miss Mervyn; that's a capital joke, by Jove!—the biter bit."

The Captain stated that, having arrived that evening at Cherrington, he was standing in the hall of the hotel, waiting for his horse, when a carriage and four drove up, and Lord Vancourt staggered up the steps, supported by his valet, with his arm in a sling and a broken nose, telling the landlord he had been stopped by highwaymen on Marston Common, and requesting a surgeon might be immediately sent for to set his arm, which had been broken by a pistol-shot. Being shown into a room, his valet went down into the stable-yard, where he followed, and heard him ask the ostler if Major Shirley's horses were ready (the name Lord Vancourt had assumed).

"'Ay, to be sure, and gone up the road an hour agone,' replied the man.

"'My master is Major Shirley,' said the valet; 'so how can that be?'

"'All gammon,' persisted the ostler; 'Major Shirley's gone, I tell ye, and a young lady along with 'un.'

"'A young lady along with him!' repeated the valet. 'What sort of looking person was she?'

"'Can't tell—boxed up tight together—doors shut and window blinds down—runaway job, I expect; but there, that's no business of mine.'

"'Well,' exclaimed the valet, 'I must have two pair of horses out in ten minutes.'

"'Can't have what we haven't got,' replied the ostler, sulkily; 'there's only one pair left.'

"'Then the same leaders must go the next stage,' said the valet.

"'Speak to the master about that,' replied the man, as he turned away.

"The facts of the case were these. Vernon had resolved to carry off Miss Mervyn the same night, and having been annoyed by Lord Vancourt's refusal to pay him down the sum he had promised for his co-operation in the plot, calculating also on the hour Lord Vancourt would reach Cherrington, he determined to be beforehand with his lordship, and, by assuming the same name, to take advantage of the relays of horses ordered on the road, thinking by this *ruse* to baffle all pursuit of himself; in short, it was diamond cut diamond, Vernon proving the sharpest of the two. This I have since learnt," said Captain Melville, "but I remained at Cherrington until I saw Lord Vancourt (after having his arm set and bandaged up, with a large plaster on his nose) enter his carriage, notwithstanding the surgeon's remonstrances, and drive rapidly on the road to London."

Whilst Melville was telling his story to Mrs. Gordon, Malcolm, Beauchamp, and Conyers were in consultation about the prisoners, who had been kept at the Priory all night with a constable.

"Being a magistrate for the county," said Beauchamp, "Bob can take down the wounded man's depositions, who is willing to confess everything, by Morgan's account; and upon this, the other two, with Mark's statement and mine, can be remanded and brought before the Bench, which sits the day after to-morrow, when I will endeavour to attend. But bear in mind they are well handcuffed, or a rescue will be attempted by Lord Mervyn's agents, although I shall give Mark some hints also."

"Who is to prosecute?" asked Bob Conyers.

"I shall, of course," replied Malcolm, "for I know Harcourt will shirk, to save his own and Mervyn's character. And now, Beauchamp, I think, if well enough, you had better return home to-day with your father, or that spiteful Mrs. Harcourt will declare we are only keeping you here on account of Blanche. I intend to take up my abode at the Priory, and shall remain until all this is settled; in short, I am so disgusted with the Harcourts that I have sent for all my traps, and do not intend just yet, if ever again, to enter their house."

"Quite right, Malcolm," replied Bob; "it is the most shameful, disgraceful affair I have ever known, and no one will believe but that Harcourt and Mervyn had some concern in the plot; and my dear pet Blanche! what a fate has she escaped with that d——d rascal! Melville says you served my lord out for it, however, Will, with a split nose and a broken arm. Gad! I should like to have seen you hit him off his legs, as Mark tells, like a ninepin."

"I was mad enough to have killed him," replied Beauchamp.

"And I wish you had," interposed Malcolm, "as he tried hard to murder you."

"I am thankful no lives are lost; and now we will go down till the governor is ready; but recollect, Malcolm, Blanche is now under your protection."

"It is not likely I shall forget either her interest or yours, old fellow," replied Malcolm; "and I expect you to take care of Constance for me."

"No fear of that," was the reply, as the two friends and Conyers descended the staircase.

Mrs. Gordon was much vexed at hearing Beauchamp's intention to leave the Priory with his father, but on his motives being made known, she was constrained to admit their force, and a compromise was effected by Constance remaining in his place.

The rage of Lord Mervyn on the discovery of his daughter's elopement with Vernon would be difficult to describe. This agreeable piece of information was communicated to him at breakfast the next morning, when the housemaid, entering the young lady's room to light the fire, found the bird had flown, and her bed had been unoccupied. She had pleaded a bad headache the night before, and retired with her maid about nine o'clock, when, immediately bolting the door, she descended the back staircase whilst the servants were at supper, and running across two fields, through which a pathway led to the high road, she was there met by Vernon, with a carriage and horses all in readiness. The head-keeper also now acquainted his lordship with the capture of his three watchers, who had been employed by Lord Vancourt in assisting to carry off Miss Douglas. Lord Mervyn raged and stormed about the house like a madman, accusing his servants of connivance in his daughter's escape, and vowing vengeance on the whole household. He saw at one glance that pursuit would now, after the lapse of so many hours, be useless. Betrayed, foiled, and outwitted by Vernon, imprecations loud and deep were vented furiously on his head. The failure also of Vancourt, with the capture of his men, and the probable exposure to the world of his own participation in the contemplated abduction of the heiress, drove him almost to frenzy. Again, to this succeeded the reflection that he had lent Lord Vancourt five hundred pounds, the preceding day, to aid in his flight, which added fuel to the fire that was already scorching his very brain. In every direction, defeat and disgrace awaited him, and he rushed from the house, like a maniac, to cool his fevered and throbbing temples in the fresh air.

Not even a transient feeling of regret for his child dwelt a moment in his troubled breast, but anger only, and fierce, implacable revenge against her and Vernon for the disgrace they had brought upon his name. Against Beauchamp, too, he vowed eternal hatred for seizing his men and defeating his plans.

From this monster in human shape we will turn to those of more kindly feelings. Beauchamp, though his sufferings from the pistol shot had not much abated, felt impelled, by a sense of duty and love to Blanche, to save her from further attempts at outrage, to attend the magistrates' meeting, where his evidence, with the confessions of the wounded man, was sufficient to obtain the commitment of the other two watchers to take their trial at the ensuing assizes, to be held in March; Lord Malcolm being the prosecutor, who declared that every effort in the meantime should be made to arrest Lord Vancourt for his dastardly attempt to carry off his cousin.

"You must not suppose, gentlemen," said Lord Malcolm, addressing the Bench, "that I, or any of Miss Douglas's family are actuated by the spirit of revenge in this prosecution; but for the honour of my family and hers, and to protect her from any further attempts of this sort, I feel bound to use my best exertions in bringing the chief perpetrators of such a cowardly, unmanly act to justice, and not allow the law to take its course only against the least guilty parties. The crime of abduction, bad enough in itself, has also in this case been most seriously aggravated by shedding of blood, and the very near sacrifice of two lives."

"You are most fully justified, Lord Malcolm," said Sir Lionel Markham, who presided, "in the course you intend to pursue, which is highly necessary, in a public point of view, to uphold the laws of the country, and prevent such outrages in civilised society." With which Malcolm, bowing to the Bench, withdrew with his friend Beauchamp.

During this investigation, the large room of the Fox (a wayside inn, in the parish of Marston, where the petty sessions were held), was crowded to overflowing, and Lord Malcolm's determination to arrest Lord Vancourt was loudly applauded by the farmers and poorer classes.

"That's right, my lord," said Farmer Stubbins, as he was leaving the room, "doan't ye let the biggest villain of the lot escape just because he's a lord; and there, to 'tempt to murder the young squire, too—dang it all, my lord, it be too bad; hanging ain't too great a punishment for such as he."

The result of these proceedings was quickly communicated to Lord Mervyn by one of his emissaries who attended to watch the case, although no attempt was made by his lordship to screen his men from the consequences of their aiding and abetting Lord Vancourt; in fact, he repudiated the whole thing, and openly expressed his hope that the watchers would be severely punished for daring to leave their places on such an errand. This avowal he deemed necessary, to prove, as he expected, his entire ignorance of Lord Vancourt's intentions.

The next morning, Mrs. Gordon, with Blanche and Constance, drove over to Bampton, where they found Will Beauchamp lying on the sofa in the library. "I am come over on purpose to give you a severe lecture, William," said Aunt Gordon, "for going yesterday to the magistrates' meeting, which, Mr. Morgan tells me, was a very imprudent act, and has increased the inflammation in your side. Indeed, if your father cannot keep you at home, I shall insist on taking you back to the Priory to see what I can do with such a wayward boy."

"My dear aunt," replied Beauchamp, "my presence was absolutely necessary yesterday, or I should not have ventured out in so cold a day; but I will now be a good boy, and remain in the house until my wound is healed."

"Will you promise me to keep this resolution?"

"Yes, certainly, dear aunt, if it will afford you any satisfaction."

"Very well, sir; and now, Constance, we will take off our bonnets, as I intend remaining here till after luncheon."

As they were leaving the room, Beauchamp said, in what was intended for an injured tone, "Blanche, you have not shaken hands with me; have I offended you?"

"Oh, no," she replied, turning back and offering her hand; "how could you think so, William?"

"Then I will not think so," still holding her hand, "if you will shut the door and sit with me a few minutes till Aunt Gordon returns." A deep blush mantled in her cheek, and her eyes were cast towards the door, as if wishing to escape. "Go, then, dear Blanche," said Beauchamp; "I read your thoughts—you would leave me; but why should you thus avoid me? Have I ever uttered one word in your presence offensive or repulsive to your feelings?"

"Oh, no, William, never; but I have been so nervous and agitated ever since that dreadful night."

"That you fear to be left alone even with William Beauchamp; but there is another cause of dread, Blanche, from which I would release you, and if you will shut the door and sit with me only a few moments, that cause shall be explained.

Don't fear me, dear girl; I will not presume on your confidence."

Blanche, without saying another word, closed the door, and returned trembling to his side, sitting down on a chair near him.

"You fear being left alone with me, Blanche, because you apprehend a renewal of that subject, which from this day shall not again escape my lips. My poor father, the other night, in his excited state, placed your hand in mine, hoping and believing our love was mutual, and at the moment, no doubt, dear Blanche, your gratitude exercised a powerful influence over your feelings; but, dearly as I prize it, on such terms I could never accept the hand of Blanche Douglas. Gratitude must not be mistaken for love; and until such time as the excitement under which you then acted is entirely removed, I will not renew the subject nearest my heart—it would be ungenerous and unfair in me to do so. Moreover, you are young and inexperienced in the world, and I will not be so selfish as to fetter you with an engagement to myself before you have had a fair opportunity of judging whether, on mixing more in society, you could still prefer me to all others."

"Then, William," said Blanche, sadly, "you do not love me as you have professed to do."

"Not love you, my own dear, darling girl!" exclaimed Beauchamp, starting up and seizing her hand, "dearer, fifty times dearer, than my own life do I love you, and you only; and here I vow that no other but this dear hand shall ever be joined with that of William Beauchamp. You are my first and only love—the only one of womankind who has ever been pressed to my heart—the first and last."

"Oh, dear William, then why should you doubt my love for you, or think me less constant than yourself?"

"I don't doubt you, dear girl, but feared gratitude might now influence you."

"William, you are only now wishing me to confess I felt love for you before gratitude; so, to relieve your mind from all further anxiety in your present state of suffering, I will make that confession. Dear William," she said, blushing, "I have indeed long loved you, and can never love another."

The words had scarcely passed her lips, before she was caught in his arms and pressed to his heart in a long embrace.

"This happiness quite overpowers me," he whispered; "a thousand thanks, my own, very own, dearest Blanche, for your generous candour; and now run up and take off your bonnet, and come sit by and comfort me. Will you, dear girl, without fear and trembling?"

"Yes," she replied, with a sweet, radiant smile, "until you are quite tired of my company."

"That will never be, Blanche; so make haste and return to me again."

The ladies now entered the room with Mr. Beauchamp, who met them in the hall. "But where," he inquired, "is Malcolm?"

"He is gone over this morning to call on Mr. Conyers," replied Mrs. Gordon, "but will be here presently to escort us home after luncheon, as we intend, Mr. Beauchamp, to taste some of your metheglin, which Constance says is equal to any Frontignac."

"Of course," said the old squire; "you would not suppose I should treat you and Blanche as morning visitors; but sitting within doors this fine day does not quite suit me; what say you to a walk instead?"

"Most willingly," replied Mrs. Gordon, "although we have only just taken off our bonnets, with the intention of sitting with William."

"One at a time is more than enough for him, and the most silent of the party the best, in his present state, whoever that may be; but on such a delicate point of distinction between ladies I shall prudently forbear to hazard an opinion; you must settle it, therefore, among yourselves, or cast lots who shall be the victim to listen to Will's complaints, while the rest are enjoying themselves in the open air."

"I think," said Constance, looking archly at her brother, "Blanche is decidedly the most prudent and silent of our party, and therefore I propose her remaining with William, only on the condition that she does not allow him to speak on any exciting subject; do you both agree to this?"

"Most willingly and cheerfully do I submit to these conditions, if Blanche will not think it too great a penance to sit by a sick man's couch."

"No, William, indeed I shall not; so now, Constance, you may run away as fast as you please with Aunt Gordon and Mr. Beauchamp."

"My dear, kind-hearted, and affectionate girl," said Beauchamp, when the others had quitted the room, "and do you think I would trespass on your gentle nature by detaining you here, when Constance and Mrs. Gordon are enjoying this beautiful sunny morning? No, no, dear Blanche, you will be happier with them."

"Do you wish me to leave you?"

"What a question!"

"Well, then," she said, "I would rather remain with you, if I may, and as I promised to do."

"And you shall, my own dear Blanche; and now sit down in this chair, and tell me all about your friend Vernon's run-away match with Miss Mervyn, the particulars of which I have not yet heard. Come nearer, Blanche,—indeed I won't bite," said Beauchamp, laughing; "and having promised Constance not to speak on any exciting subject, I must not make love; so you are quite safe, dear girl."

Encouraged by his frank though gentle manner, Blanche no longer dreaded being left alone with her lover; and their happy, confiding looks, when Mrs. Gordon returned from her walk, convinced her how pleasantly had passed the time they had been left together. Lord Malcolm arrived in time for luncheon, soon after which, in consideration of Will Beauchamp's inflammatory symptoms, Mrs. Gordon took her leave, forbidding him to leave the house until she called again.

CHAPTER XVI.

The breaking up of the frost, the same evening, set the fox-hunters once more in motion, and the first open day being as usual advertised for the kennels, a large assemblage of sportsmen mustered at Bampton, where genuine hospitality always awaited them, and sincere congratulations were offered to the old squire on his son's narrow escape. The farmers especially, when William Beauchamp walked out on the lawn among them, pressed round him, all eager to shake hands and testify their almost unbounded delight at having their favourite restored to them.

"Ah, squire," exclaimed Farmer Stiles, "it made my heart nearly jump up into my mouth when John Gubbins brought the news, the next morning, that you were shot and lying at the Priory—it hit me up all of a heap, squire, and I shook and trembled like an aspen tree. 'Why, maister,' said John, 'what's the matter wi' ye? you do look flabbergasted loike—shakes like old Trooper when he had the staggers.' Sure enough I did stagger more than walk into the house, and swallowing a wine-glass of brandy, rode full split for the Priory, Missus and the servants thinking I were gone clean out of my mind; but at the turn of the lane I nearly unhorsed the doctor, who told me all about it. 'What ails thee, Stiles?' shouted the doctor, 'hurrahing and waving thy hat, and frightening my horse into the ditch; drunk or crazy?'—'Neither, doctor,' says I, 'but overjoyed at hearing that the young squire ain't killed.'"

The news had by this time spread all over the county, being reported in the two opposite papers according to the editor's political opinions. The heading in the Tory journal standing thus, "Daring outrage and attempted abduction of Miss Douglas!" which was modified by the Radical organ into, "Failure of a runaway match between Lord V——t and Miss D——s," with comments thereon, insinuating that the young lady had been foiled in her attempted and willing flight with her noble and highly gifted lover by the intervention of some meddling friends.

Lord Malcolm, on reading the latter paragraph, wrote immediately to the editor, giving him a true statement of the case, and insisting on an immediate contradiction of the untrue and offensive article, which, under the threat of an action for libel, was repudiated as emanating from an anonymous correspondent.

The concourse of horse and footmen drawn together at Bampton on this occasion far exceeded any former gathering—numbers flocking there from curiosity only, to know the true facts of the case; and every sportsman in the neighbourhood deeming it an act of imperative courtesy to father and son on the fortunate termination of the affair. A group of pedestrians also assembled round Mark Rosier, who detailed the events of that night's adventure, extolling Beauchamp's courage to the skies, telling them how he knocked the big lord twice off his legs like a ninepin.

While Beauchamp was standing talking on the lawn to the gentlemen and farmers, Mrs. Gordon's carriage drove up to the door, with Blanche and Constance; and no sooner did Farmer Stiles recognise the heiress, than raising his hat high in the air, he shouted from his stentorian lungs, "Now, gentlemen, three cheers for Miss Douglas and her happy escape from that villanous lord!" All hats were off in a moment, and as

Blanche stepped from the carriage, a shout, loud, long and hearty, arose, which vibrated through her very heart, and was again and again repeated by the enthusiastic Stiles and his brother farmers; during which Beauchamp made his way into the house.

"William," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, "what was the meaning of that terrific shouting on the lawn?"

"The farmers' welcome to dear Blanche on her happy escape. The moment she was recognised, these honest, kind-hearted fellows could not suppress their feelings of delight at her rescue from Lord Vancourt's cowardly attack; but see, Malcolm is now returning thanks."

Lord Malcolm had just ridden up as the cheers subsided, and learning the cause, spoke thus: "Gentlemen, I thank you all from my heart for your loudly expressed, and, I am sure, warmly-felt congratulations on my cousin's escape from the dastardly attempt at her abduction by a cowardly and unprincipled scoundrel, which I have no hesitation in pronouncing Lord Vancourt to be"—("Hear! hear!" shouted Stiles)—"and I take this opportunity," continued Malcolm, "of stating here publicly, that so far from Miss Douglas being a willing participator in this vile plot (which has been insinuated by a leading Radical paper in this county), that she would have preferred death to such a fate; and for myself, gentlemen, as one of her nearest and dearest relatives, I assert that I would rather have seen her consigned to the grave than married to such a man as Lord Vancourt."

At the termination of this brief harangue, during which a dead silence prevailed, a loud "hurrah!" again burst forth, amid cries of "Shame! shame!"

"Now, then," Stiles vociferated, "one cheer more for Lord Malcolm and the young squire, with long lives and good wives to 'em both!" and another cheer, the strongest and loudest of all, echoed far and wide, making the very armour rattle in the old oak hall.

"Eh! 'pon honour!" exclaimed Captain Markham, who was pouring out some cherry brandy, "those fellows make the very glasses dance on the table. Demmit, Bob, I wish you would stop their brazen throats: we shall have the old building about our ears like the walls of Jericho."

"Ha! ha! not bad for you, Markham," said Conyers; "but these fellows are intent on propping up, not pulling down, the House of Beauchamp; let them cheer on, and I only hope the sound of their sweet voices may be borne on the beeeze to Marston Castle."

Whilst the old squire and Bob Conyers were doing the honours at the breakfast table to a large party of visitors, Mark, with the underlings about the place, was occupied in distributing strong beer and stout to the assemblage on the lawn, making every man who quaffed the contents of the black jack drink to the health of the young squire.

The drawing-room also was filled with ladies who had driven over to see the generally large attendance when the fixture was made for Bampton House, and, on this occasion, many more attended from curiosity, to hear from Will Beauchamp and Constance a true account of Lord Vancourt's attempt on the heiress. As Beauchamp entered the room, Selina Markham rushed forward to seize his hand, exclaiming, "Will, Will, you are not such a sawney as I thought—and so you gave my friend hooknose a good drubbing, I hear, and split his beautiful beak for him?—this is charming news, 'pon honour! but eh! aw! the thief has paled your face, Will Beauchamp—this is as bad as a fall over a five-barred gate, with a broken rib."

"Not quite, Selina; I shall be all right again in a few days."

"Mind you are, Master Will, as we are to have a hop next week to a fiddle and flute, and I shall parade you on that night as the champion of the Light Weights. Ned says you are a demmed plucky young fellow, and ought to be in the Life Guards."

"Much obliged for the compliment, Selina; although in time of peace, a fox-hunter's life is more exciting and perilous than a soldier's."

The hounds now appeared, and were looking eagerly about, in expectation of seeing their young master. "Oh, what a beautiful sight," exclaimed Blanche, who was standing with Mrs. Gordon and Beauchamp at one of the windows; "what handsome dogs!"

"Would you like to have them at the window, dear Blanche?" whispered Beauchamp.

"Oh, yes, William, pray let them come!"

The window was raised directly, and at their master's call, the whole pack rushed to his summons, jumping up, and licking his hand in exuberant delight, and ready to devour him with caresses.

"How these faithful hounds must love you, William!"

murmured Blanche, as she leaned out to pat their honest heads.

"Yes, dear girl, there is no flattery in their professions, but genuine true affection; and now, as the gentlemen are all ready, I must close the window, and you will see them walk reluctantly away with the whipper-in, casting many a long and lingering look behind."

The appearance of Beauchamp with Miss Douglas, patting and fondling the hounds together, could not fail to attract all eyes towards them; and many and sincere were the aspirations breathed by their true friends, the farmers especially, for the future happiness of the pair, who appeared formed for each other.

"Ah," muttered Stiles to young Hazel, as they rode away, "what a sweet-tempered, beautiful young lady Miss Blanche is, and I'll warrant the squire loves her as the apple of his eye—how happy they both looked! Blessings on 'em both, say I, and may they soon become man and wife."

The company had now taken their leave, as the hounds disappeared from the scene, and Beauchamp remained with Mrs. Gordon and Blanche, Constance having galloped off with Malcolm and Conyers, promising, however, to return early

"Well, dear aunt," said Beauchamp, "your presence at our home meet was quite an unexpected honour, and to me a most delightful surprise."

"Why, William, to tell you the truth, I rather suspected the temptation would be too great, and feared you would be rash enough to join the hounds, unless myself and Blanche drove over in time to prevent you; and another reason was, that if you were a good boy, and kept your promise, I would reward you for your dutiful conduct, by spending the day with you;—there, William, was not that very good and considerate in me?"

"Yes, dear aunt, as you ever are to one who does not deserve half your kindness."

"Of that I suppose I may be the best judge, Mr. William; and now, having breakfasted very early on your account, I and Blanche shall not object to another cup of tea or coffee, and a slice of cold fowl, if there is such a thing left in the breakfast room;" to which they immediately repaired, but found few eatables remaining, except part of a cold round of spiced beef and a knuckle of ham, which had still held out against the repeated attacks of the hungry fox-hunters; all the more delicate viands having entirely vanished. Ringing the bell, the old butler appeared, when Beauchamp inquired if there was any cold fowl or game left in the house, desiring him to bring in also some fresh tea for the ladies.

"I think, sir," said the old man, "we can find something the ladies would like quite as well as cold fowl, if they can wait a short time." Accordingly, in about twenty minutes the butler reappeared, with a brace of grilled partridges, split down the back, and a few small cakes of a peculiar sausage prepared at Bampton House.

"There, aunt,'' said Beauchamp, "is a sportsman's breakfast for you and Blanche, to which I hope you will do justice."

"Really, William, it looks very inviting, and I never saw game sent up to table in that fashion before."

"It is one of our old fashions, aunt, and a much quicker way of dressing game or poultry than roasting, and in my opinion the flavour is far superior."

The merits of the dish were tested, and approved of by both the ladies, who pronounced it a decided improvement over the usual mode of cooking; and after breakfast, Mrs. Gordon having left the room for a few moments, Beauchamp, taking Blanche's hand, said, "I think, dear girl, after what has passed between us, it is a duty I owe our true, kind friend, Aunt Gordon, to make her acquainted with our mutual love, and ask her approval of my addresses (I will not now say engagement) to her dearly-prized niece."

"Yes, dear William," replied Blanche, blushing, and with her hand trembling in his; "I wish no concealments from my affectionate aunt, and have felt rather uncomfortable sometimes in her presence since we last parted, because I feared you might not approve my telling her."

"Thank you, my own dear love," replied Beauchamp, raising her hand to his lips; "but, dear, dear Blanche, how you tremble. Love me! oh, still love me as a brother, if you fear me as a lover!"

"I do not fear you, dear William," raising her eyes timidly to his, "but I have become so nervous lately, you must not regard it."

Her hand was still retained in his as Mrs. Gordon returned to the room, when Beauchamp turning to her, said—"Dear aunt, I have been bold enough to confess my long ardent attachment to dear Blanche, which only wants your approval to make me the most envied as well as the most happy of men.

Do I presume too much in hoping you will not withhold your kind consent?"

"Indeed, Mr. William! I scarcely know what to say, as I suspect this confession to Blanche has been made long ago; and I think you have not treated me well—in these concealments from one who has always regarded you, hitherto, as her own son."

"Indeed, indeed, dearest aunt, I have had no opportunity of making this disclosure to you before, without writing a formal proposal, which I felt rather reluctant to do; but will you forgive this little omission, as I never intended to keep back anything from you, who have been to me as a second mother?"

"Well, poor fellow! you have suffered too much pain lately for me to inflict more; and now, dear Blanche, if you do really love this wayward, worthless boy, I shall not add to *your* nervousness either by withholding my approval of your choice, —so come here, both of you;" when, joining their hands together, Mrs. Gordon, in the most affectionate and impressive manner, invoked a blessing on their union, and, overcome by her own as well as Blanche's emotion, hastily left them together, telling them they would find her in the drawing-room. In half an hour they rejoined her, when Beauchamp told her, as Blanche was still so young, he did not wish her to be bound by any formal engagement to himself thus early, especially as she was to be presented at court in the spring, and make her *début* in the London fashionable circles.

"That entirely depends upon Blanche's own feelings," replied Mrs. Gordon; "but, were I in her place, William, I would not afford you even this little loop-hole for escape; *you* want, I suppose, sir, to have a season in town, too, and if you met with a prettier girl than Blanche, intend to put her aside."

"Dear, dear aunt!" exclaimed Beauchamp, "how can you utter such a libel on my constancy and devotion to her I prefer above all the treasures on earth?"

"Then what do you mean, you silly boy?"

"I do not wish our attachment to each other to be made public at present, or any engagement, on Blanche's part, to exist, although I hold myself firmly and irrevocably bound to her: but if, at the end of the London season, she still prefers me to any other, I will then claim her hand, on the condition that her whole fortune shall be settled upon herself."

"Really, William, you are so ridiculously romantic, and particular also, I shall advise Blanche to give you up altogether."

"Indeed, aunt, I only urge this from my deep love to her, and the fear that she may be too hastily committed under her present excited feelings."

"Well, then, you and Blanche must settle these childish objections between yourselves; and when you have made up your minds whether you are really in love or not, let me know. For the present I shall say nothing to any other person on the subject, not even to Malcolm and Constance, who would only laugh at your folly; but bear in mind, you have both my free consent to marry when you please; and under present circumstances, I do not consider it necessary to consult Mr. Harcourt. There—that will do; so now be off and take a short walk, while I finish writing my letters; but remember, William must not go very far."

On their return, Mrs. Gordon asked if they had made up their first quarrel. "Nearly, if not quite, dear aunt; although Blanche was very indignant at being considered either so childish or so fickle as not to know her own mind; but as she would not consent either to marry or run away with me before this day week, the matter remains in abeyance. Still, on one point we are agreed, that it will be more prudent to make an effort to obtain Mr. Harcourt's approbation before our engagement is made known to any other person, or he might consider such an act, without consulting him, a most serious and unpardonable offence."

"Well, William, I think you are quite right in that view of the case; but, until this unfortunate trial is past, any application to Mr. Harcourt would be perfectly fruitless on your part, and in the meantime I will endeavour to smooth the way, and call at Throseby; as it is far better for us all to keep on good terms with the Harcourts, if possible."

The morning passed rapidly away to the two lovers, and Blanche discarding further reserve, her usual cheerful buoyancy of spirits once more gladdened the heart of William Beauchamp, and her light, playful laugh rang through the old Hall, where she was engaged at a game of billiards with him when Lord Malcolm and Constance returned.

"Ah, my pet," exclaimed her cousin, "so this is the way you have been killing time, which, of course, has passed very heavily since we left you; but I need not ask who wins?"

"And why not, Charles?"

"Because you are as two to one against Beauchamp, and can at any time win more games with your eyes, dear girl, than ever you will with your hands."

"Well, Charles, since no spell of that kind will influence you, I challenge you to a game when this is finished."

"Not now, Blanche, as I must play first with my knife and fork, and tell Will all about our day's sport."

"You will find luncheon on the table," said Beauchamp, "and I will join you in a few minutes; but I wish you would persuade Mrs. Gordon to dine here; the moon rises early, and there is no fear of robbers."

"With all my heart," said Malcolm, as he turned into the drawing-room first; when, having overcome Mrs. Gordon's objections, he returned, saying he would send back his hunter to the Priory, and go home in the carriage with the ladies. "Is not this a delightful arrangement, Blanche?"

"Oh, yes, Charles; I am so happy you have prevailed on aunt to stop and dine here."

"Well, then, after I have had some luncheon I will accept your challenge at the billiard table, and leave the fox-hunting tale for Bob Conyers to relate over his wine."

Being rather disgusted with Charley's performances as huntsman, that individual returned with the old squire about five o'clock, and at half-past six this sociable, happy little party sat down to their dinner, which was discussed with great gusto and high glee; the old squire keeping his guests alive with merriment and good humour.

"Well, Blanche," said he, "it makes my old heart glad to see your sweet, cheerful smile once more, and the colour again in your cheeks. Poor child! you had a narrow escape, and Will too; but there, I see it is a sore subject still, so we will say no more about it—but have a glass of wine together instead. Fill her a bumper, Will, and here"—raising his own glass—"is long life and happiness to you, my dear girl, and confusion to all your enemies;" and the contents instantly disappeared. "Come, Blanche," observing her sipping her wine, "don't make two bites at a cherry—off with it, child—a bottle of this sort would do you no harm. Don't look at Aunt Gordon: you are not under petticoat government here; and now, Malcolm, fill your aunt's glass, as her turn comes next."

"It's no use trying to refuse," said Malcolm, as she withdrew her glass; "the governor will have his own way at Bampton."

"Oh, I see," said the squire; "Mrs. Gordon likes something lighter; champagne or burgundy—which shall it be?"

"Neither for me, Mr. Beauchamp, as I have taken enough already."

"Pooh! pooh! you shall taste both. Thomas, a bottle of champagne and one of burgundy; and mind the cork is sound."

"Yes, sir," as the old butler toddled out of the room.

"That's right, squire!" exclaimed Conyers; "ladies never refuse champagne, and I am just in the humour for a glass or two myself."

"Really, Mr. Conyers, you seem to have joined in a conspiracy to make us all tipsy to-night," replied Mrs. Gordon.

"Oh, no, my dear madam; we only wish to make your eyes and dear Blanche's sparkle a little more brilliantly."

"Now, Mrs. Gordon," said Mr. Beauchamp, as Thomas appeared with two long-necked bottles, "which first—champagne or burgundy?"

"Champagne, if I must take any;" and immediately a tall glass sparkled by the side of each lady, which in courtesy could not be refused.

"We shall do now," said the old squire, "and the ladies shall not be obliged by me to take any more than one glass of burgundy after dinner."

When the ladies were rising from the table, Mrs. Gordon said, "Malcolm, you must not be late to-night, as I have once or twice observed, in our drives, a tall, stout man on horseback loitering behind the carriage, which makes me feel rather nervous." A quiet smile passed over William Beauchamp's features as she said this, which Blanche noticing, asked in a low tone if he knew who this person was.

"Yes, my dear girl," as he rose to open the door, and stood with her for a moment outside; "you need not feel alarmed. It is Mark Rosier, who is your guard day and night wherever you go."

"Oh, dear William," she said, putting her hand in his, "how kind and considerate thus to watch over me."

"Mark is only my substitute whilst I am disabled, and when able I shall guard you myself."

"No, dear William; that you must not do. I never can repay you for all your anxiety and trouble about me."

"You can guess the reward, dear girl, which will more than repay me."

"I am all your own, now, William," she said, blushing, "and therefore I suppose you will claim it, whether I like to give it or not. And he folded her in his arms, saying, "My own dearest treasure! how undeserving am I of such a blessing as your love!"

"Dear William, you deserve more than I can give; but now let me go."

"Tell Aunt Gordon and Constance, then, if you like, about Mark Rosier, but no one else."

As she tripped after her friends into the drawing-room, Mrs. Gordon asked the cause of her detention by Beauchamp, which was explained by Blanche telling her the name of the dark man who had been noticed following the carriage.

"Just like my dear brother," exclaimed Constance; "ever too anxious about those he loves. Ah, Blanche, you will have a sad time of it when you are married; he will never let you out of his sight except on hunting days, when you may have the opportunity of a little quiet flirtation with others, but rest assured he will never let you go alone to any dinner-party or ball; in fact, my dear girl, my only fear is that you may have too much of his agreeable company."

"Of that *I* have no fear, dear Constance, for I could not be happy anywhere without him."

"Well, dear, I have hitherto refrained from saying much in William's favour, lest you might think me an interested person, and endeavouring to prejudice you; but now you have acted from the impulse of your own heart in accepting and returning his love, I may tell you that I do not believe it possible you could have selected one who would make you so thoroughly happy as my own dear brother."

"In which I perfectly agree," added Mrs. Gordon; "but William is so romantic, Constance, as to insist on Blanche having the pick of the London fashionables before she is finally engaged to him. What would you say to Malcolm's making a similar proposal to you?"

"That I should not feel very much flattered by such a want of confidence in my affection; but William, I am quite certain, can have only one motive; and as Blanche has seen so little of the world, I rather think he is pursuing the most honourable course, and exhibiting a denial which very few men, if any, would practise under similar circumstances, knowing that the issue of this trial must be life or death to his hopes of happiness."

"Dear Constance," said Blanche, throwing her arms round her neck, "I am quite vexed, and almost angry, with William for entertaining such doubts of my constancy, and have told him I never will agree to such humiliating terms. I am his now and for ever, and your own dear sister, my beloved Constance."

And thus we will leave these two affectionate girls enjoying their rapturous feelings of delight in the contemplation of that nearer tie, which would soon bind them closer than ever to each other.

CHAPTER XVII.

We must now look into the dining-room, where Conyers was relating the events of the day.

"We have had," said Bob, "very unsatisfactory work. Found, of course, in Parkwood, directly, and went away fast for about twenty minutes, when the hounds, coming to a check in a large field stained by a flock of sheep, Charley seized upon them instantly, and thought to make a display of his genius by making a forward cast, taking it for granted the fox had gone straight to the Holt; but the fox, having changed his mind and turned away short to the left for the furze hills, our run was spoilt. Found again in the furze hills, a thorough good traveller, who went straight through the Holt, and then faced the open for Barton Court coverts, which he skirted, and held on his course over the downs to Staunton village, where we were at fault for the first time among some small enclosures. For fifty minutes the pace had been first-rate, few being able to live with the hounds; and from a shepherd we heard the fox was not half a mile before us, and no doubt lay down somewhere; but Charley, all eagerness, would not give them time, and again made a forward cast through the village towards Staunton Wood, still persisting (notwithstanding my remonstrances) in holding the hounds a good mile in that direction. Whilst occupied in this wild-goose chase, our hunted fox was viewed away from a ditch, where the hounds first threw up, and met by several of the heavy brigade in his way back to Barton Woods. Halloaing and screaming were now the order of the day, in which Charley took the lead, rattling, with the hounds full gallop, back through the village; but the fox had made good his retreat, and we soon had two or three fresh ones on foot, when we reached Barton Court, where I left Mr. Charley thoroughly disgusted. 'Holloa!' here; 'tally ho!' there; hounds' heads up, looking about, and wondering what it all meant; in short, Will, your old friend Stiles remarked, 'It will not do, Mr. Conyers—the pack will be ruined, if the young squire don't take them in hand again, and that pretty soon.' The fact is, Charley is too much in a hurry, and tries to kill his fox before he is half beaten; and, like many other young huntsmen, depends more upon his own assumed knowledge than the hounds' noses."

"You must remember," said Beauchamp, "it is his first day, and he will improve."

"I don't think it, Will; his ideas are all wrong at present, and he will certainly spoil the hounds by trying to ride away from the field, which appears to be his chief consideration. The more haste the less speed; and a thorough good huntsman, however quick, ought never to be in a hurry. It is the same with hounds—a *fast* and a *quick* hound are very distinct animals; and a *harey starey* fellow, who, as Beckford says, would ride over a church if it came in his way, is generally the reverse of quick."

"Well, Bob, I hope to be in the saddle again the beginning of next week; and now, as I know Mrs. Gordon will be in a fidget about leaving, we must cut short our discussion about the merits of hounds and huntsmen—what say you, Malcolm?"

"Always as ready to attend the ladies, my dear fellow, as yourself; so come along."

"Well, aunt," said he, as they entered the drawing-room, "don't you think me a very good, obedient nephew, to break up our after-dinner sitting so early?"

"Yes, Charles, you have behaved very well indeed to-night."

"Ah! very little merit is due to me, for Will Beauchamp, being restricted from wine, hurried us off before our second bottle was finished, for which Conyers and myself voted him a confounded bore, and a very selfish fellow to boot; so now, to be revenged, I shall make Constance and Blanche sing till midnight."

"Indeed, Charles, you will do no such thing; I shall order the carriage in half an hour, as, after what has happened, I feel very nervous in being out late; but if Mr. Beauchamp and William will dine with us on Monday next, by which time I hope he will be nearly recovered, you shall sit up till two in the morning, if you like."

"Agreed, aunt; we will have a regular night of it at the Priory on Monday, won't we, Bob?"

"Ay, ay, Malcolm; and raise such a din as to astonish the quiet inmates of that most respectable establishment."

The next morning, Mrs. Gordon, with Blanche, called on the Harcourts, by whom they were received much more graciously than they expected, with many professions of regret for the untoward event which had occurred; but to their proposal of Blanche returning again to Throseby, Mrs. Gordon decidedly objected. "Poor girl!" she said; "she has not yet recovered the shock of that night, and never moves out in the carriage, or on foot, without a guard to protect her from further outrage."

"Surely there can be necessity for such supervision," replied Mrs. Harcourt, "as it is reported Lord Vancourt was seriously wounded, and therefore must be unable to renew the attempt, even were he so disposed, which I think highly improbable."

"We have very good authority for believing Lord Mervyn was equally concerned in the plot," replied Mrs. Gordon; "and it is not improbable that other agents may be employed to carry out the designs of these honourable noblemen, who are a disgrace to the peerage."

"I have been assured by Lord Mervyn," said Mrs. Harcourt, "to whom I wrote for an explanation, that his men were employed by Lord Vancourt without his knowledge."

"Which we can prove," retorted Mrs. Gordon, "is a great falsehood; as my Lord Mervyn was himself the originator and concocter of this disgraceful scheme, and Lord Vancourt a too willing tool in his hands; that's what we know, Mr. Harcourt, and are prepared to prove at the trial; and it is infamous that a married man like Lord Mervyn, with children, should have entered into such a vile conspiracy to ruin a poor defenceless girl. We know all about it, Mr. Harcourt, and that this Lord Vancourt was invited down to the Castle for the express purpose of carrying off your ward, and that Lord Mervyn knew him to be a poor, good-for-nothing, fortune-hunting rake about town. The whole thing was planned by Lord Mervyn and Mr. Harley (whom you will remember meeting at the Castle, and who was purposely instructed to laud this Lord Vancourt, and represent him as a person of high character and large fortune); these two, with that worthy person, Richard Vernon, arranged the whole proceedings; and as all this will come out upon the trial, Mr. Harcourt—if you have any regard for your own position in the county, my advice to you is, to avoid further intimacy with the contemptible owner of Marston Castle."

"Indeed, Mrs. Gordon, I am perfectly astonished at your account of this matter, but still think you must be in error as to Lord Mervyn having so grossly committed himself."

"*You* are in error, Mr. Harcourt, *I* am not," replied Mrs. Gordon, as she rose to take her leave; "but I hope we shall see you on Monday at the Priory, where I have asked a few friends in the evening."

The invitation being accepted, was considered as the outward adjustment of any personal differences between the two aunts, although their inward feelings remained in *statu quo.* In direct refutation of the scandalous reports spread by Lord Mervyn and his partisans, Mrs. Gordon determined, therefore, on giving as large a party as her house could contain, with a dance afterwards, as a testimony of rejoicing for Blanche's happy escape; and the invitations to her neighbours, Lady Markham, Mrs. Rolleston, Mrs. Compton, and others, were expressive of her feelings on this point. The Beauchamps, with Conyers, were her only guests at the dinner-table; but a splendid supper was provided for the other company, who began to arrive about half-past nine, Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt being almost the first to make their appearance, and constrained, therefore, to listen to the felicitations offered to Mrs. Gordon and her niece.

"Ah, my dear girl!" said Selina Markham, kissing Blanche, "so this is an ovation for your escape from Hooknose, Mervyn, and Co.?"

"Hush, Selina!"

"I shall not be hushed, poor child, from expressing my congratulations, and only regret Mark did not send a ball through that coachman's leg, to prevent his running away. But how fares our champion, Will Beauchamp? I intend heading a subscription to present him with a piece of plate, in token of his gallant conduct in defending the 'rights of women to choose their own husbands.' What will you give, Blanche? or"—(sinking her voice to a whisper)—"do you propose rewarding him in another way?"

"Oh, nonsense, Selina; how foolish you talk to-night!"

"*I* should not call it foolish, child, to reward *my* preserver with something more substantial than gold and silver, and I rather suspect, from those tell-tale eyes, Blanche Douglas is of the same opinion; but as the subject *appears so disagreeable*, let us talk of something else—this grand hunt ball, which is now fixed to take place on the fourteenth of next month, St. Valentine's day. That is to be a splendid affair, as all are requested to appear in characters or fancy dresses. What is yours to be, Blanche?"

"I really have not thought much about it yet, Selina: but here comes your brother."

"Eh—Miss Douglas—glad to see you looking so bewitching to-night. 'Pon honour, roses all returned—frightened enough, I dare say, at first; demmed disagreeable affair—lucky it's no worse—journey to Scotland no joke at this time of year—*nolens volens*, and all that sort of thing. But Dick did the thing cleverly—all *volens* in his case. Demmit! how old Mervyn stormed and raved!—cracked, they say, ever since. Lost five hundred pounds as well as his daughter—served the old villain right—regularly floored—wish he'd been shot instead of Will Beauchamp. Poor fellow! looks very white about the gills still."

"There, Ned, that will do," said his sister; "we have heard enough of that story."

"Then, Miss Douglas, may I have the honour—first quadrille, or second, eh?"

"Neither," replied Blanche, laughing, "but the fourth, if you particularly desire it."

"Thank you, Miss Douglas, feel greatly honoured, and all that sort of thing;" with which the captain walked off.

"Ned is not such a very bad sort of fellow, after all," remarked Selina, "although, I must confess, an egregious fool in some respects; but he knows what is due to our sex, and has very honourable, upright feelings, and, I believe, nothing would induce him to do a mean or cowardly action."

"I assure you, Selina, I entertain the same opinion of your brother, and am always glad to dance with him when I can, as he is ever most gentlemanly and kind in his manner, and the very reverse of Richard Vernon."

"Well, there is one comfort, Blanche, we shall never be troubled with that cur again; but what a fate for that poor girl, to be linked for life to such a man! What fools girls are to be taken by handsome-looking men, who have no other recommendation; I had rather marry the ugliest man, with a good heart and disposition, than the veriest Adonis without these qualities; and it is far better to learn to love a plain man for his virtues, than to be obliged to dislike a handsome one for his vices, after marriage; but a truce to our moralising, as the fiddles are tuning, and, I suppose, Will Beauchamp, having dined here, has engaged you for the first dance;" which coming to claim, Beauchamp approached and asked Selina for the second.

"I scarcely know whether I shall honour you or not, for, as Ned says, you still look very seedy and white about the gills, and I don't consider hopping and jumping about likely to improve your health."

"Sauntering quietly through the figure will do me no harm, Selina."

"Well, then, I will take you under my sage care, Mr. Will, to prevent your falling into worse hands."

On accepting Beauchamp's arm, Blanche said, anxiously, "I fear you are acting very imprudently in dancing to-night, William?"

"No, dear Blanche; a little exercise will do me good now; but I shall not exceed two or three dances, and then sit down to criticise the performance of others, and make all kinds of ill-natured speeches, as some people will of me to-night."

"What do you mean, dear William?"

"The Throseby Hall lady looks daggers at me, and I verily believe, in her heart, would rather have seen you in the power of that villain and made wretched for life, than witness your happiness with those you love."

"Indeed, William, I hope not, and trust you are mistaken."

"I am not singular, dear girl, as Bob Conyers also thinks she hates me, cordially, for my interference; but notwithstanding her forbidding looks, she shall receive no incivility from me on your account, although I hope never to see you under her control again."

"Indeed, William, I am so happy with dear Aunt Gordon, that I never wish to leave the Priory, where I feel quite at home, which I never did at Throseby."

Blanche's beaming looks and light, happy spirits, when dancing with Beauchamp, would have satisfied any but the most determined sceptic that Lord Vancourt was not the object of her choice; and the anxious, thoughtful glance sometimes directed to his face, did not escape the observation of some, who could read the language of love. Captain Melville was one of that number, who, turning to Conyers, said, "My surmises are now confirmed, Bob; Beauchamp has won the prize, and barring myself of course, there is no man I know more deserving, and whom I would rather see the husband of that sweet girl."

"You are jumping to conclusions in too great a hurry," replied Bob. "She must naturally feel very grateful to Beauchamp for risking his life in her defence; but that impression may be rubbed off by a season in town."

"I think not, Conyers; but, at any rate, I hold my determination of exposing that fellow, Vancourt, and will certainly prevail upon the Italian to give her evidence, if possible. She is passionate and revengeful, as women of her country generally are; and I verily believe, from what she told me, that, had Vancourt succeeded in carrying off and marrying Miss Douglas, she would have followed and stabbed him to the heart."

Under the presidency of Lord Malcolm, who officiated as master of the ceremonies, Mrs. Gordon's party passed off most pleasantly, being pronounced by the younger portion of the company the most agreeable and enjoyable *réunion* of the season. All the arrangements were good, the persons invited (with few exceptions) being well known and on good terms with each other. The little band of music was the best that could be procured; and the refreshments abundant, and of the best description. At the supper-table champagne circulated most freely, Malcolm and Conyers acting as toast-masters, at different tables, having resolved that Aunt Gordon's guests should have good cause to remember the Priory ball, and her on whose account it had been given.

Sir Lionel Markham and the old squire kept the game up some time after the ladies quitted the supper-table, with their good-humoured and witty remarks. "Now, gentlemen," said Somerville Coventry, rising, "with Lord Malcolm's leave, I will propose two toasts, to which, I believe, all here assembled will heartily respond: 'Health and happiness to our kind hostess, Mrs. Gordon and her fair niece, Miss Douglas, and confusion to the scoundrel who attempted her abduction,'" which was rapturously received, all rising and cheering. When this had subsided, Coventry again rose, observing, "The next toast I have to propose is, 'Fox-hunting, with which I must couple the names of our present high-spirited young master, Will Beauchamp, and his worthy father the old squire.'"

"That's your sort," vociferated Sir Lucius Gwynne, "trumps, both; fill your glasses, gentlemen, no heel-taps—but bumpers fair—'The Beauchamps and fox-hunting'"—and a hearty, hip! hip! hurrah! followed, which echoed through every room in the house. "Well done, my friends," shouted Gwynne; "*Floreat scientia, esto perpetua.*"

William Beauchamp returned thanks in a short, unpretending speech; thanking Coventry and Sir Lucius for the high compliment paid to his father and himself, and expressing his hopes that "they might always deserve the good opinion of their brother fox-hunters, as well as the gentlemen of the county who did not participate in their sport." This speech was much applauded, and soon after the gentlemen returned to the ball-room; Mr. Harcourt beginning to entertain a more favourable opinion of Beauchamp, from the evident cordiality with which his name was received by so large and respectable a company.

Blanche was sitting with Mrs. Harcourt and her Aunt Gordon, when Captain Markham approaching them, the former inquired the meaning of the shouting at the supper-table, which had almost deafened her.

"Eh! aw! yeeas! rather uproarious! bad taste, I dare say. Drank Will Beauchamp's health and fox-hunting—couldn't stop the fellows—would have it—hip! hip! and all that sort of thing. Gwynne said, he was a demmed plucky, high-spirited young fellow, after that little affair of yours, Miss Douglas, on the common;—everybody agreed with him—three cheers more,—but didn't forget the ladies—Mrs. Gordon's health drank vociferously. Now, Miss Douglas,—believe I have the honour—next quadrille." With which the Captain walked off with the heiress.

The ball was kept up until three o'clock in the morning, when the company dispersed; Sir Lucius declaring, in fox-hunting parlance, "that Mrs. Gordon's party was *the run of the season.*"

CHAPTER XVIII.

We must now devote a little space to the fugitives, Lord Vancourt and Vernon. The former dreading pursuit from the determined resolution of Beauchamp (of whose prowess and courage, from Vernon's sneers, he had formed rather an erroneous opinion, until brought into contact with him), sped on his journey without stopping until he reached London, putting up at an hotel in a retired part of the city, from which he removed the next day, to a lodging near the Regent's Park, which his valet engaged for his master under the assumed name of Captain Hammond, where he remained until his fractures were sufficiently reduced to enable him to start for the Continent.

Vernon, after the ceremony had been performed by the blacksmith, which, according to the laws of Scotland, riveted him to Miss Mervyn, thought it advisable to visit Paris, until Lord Mervyn's anger had cooled down a little. He was lounging one day down the Boulevards, when he met Lord Vancourt, and accosted him as usual, who, drawing haughtily up, and refusing his proffered hand, said, "After the dishonourable trick you have served me, Mr. Vernon, I must beg to decline your further acquaintance."

"Pray explain yourself, my lord," replied Vernon, "as *I* am the person aggrieved, and your conduct to me in refusing to fulfil your engagement and pledged word of honour, at Marston Castle, is a much more dishonourable transaction than any I can have committed against your lordship."

"My meaning, sir, is very plain; by forestalling the horses I had ordered, and assuming the same name I had taken, you would have left me at the mercy of my pursuers."

"As you would have left me, my lord, by not paying down the sum you promised, and on which I fully depended, to prosecute my journey to Scotland, and which, but for unexpected assistance, I had been unable to accomplish; but as I am informed a searching investigation is to be made into your lordship's attempted abduction of Miss Douglas, which has assumed a most serious character, from your violence in shooting Mr. Beauchamp, any little light I may be able to throw on the subject will, I doubt not, be well received by your opponents, who, by the account transmitted to me, appear determined to prosecute your lordship to the utmost extremity."

"And could you, Mr. Vernon, calling yourself a gentleman, be guilty of such a mean, contemptible action as to turn evidence against me and your own father-in-law?—there is more honour among thieves, sir."

"Very possibly, my lord, as thieves generally share the booty obtained by their joint dexterity—*equally*. Your lordship has failed to practise even their honesty, by keeping back my share of the money you obtained from Lord Mervyn."

"Oh, very well, Mr. Vernon; I will endeavour then, as speedily as possible to discharge my obligations to you."

"The sooner the more acceptable, my lord, as my finances are in a very low state just now, and my purse requires replenishing; perhaps your lordship will be good enough to favour me with your present residence, and name what day I may call for an arrangement of this little affair."

"My address is No. —, Rue St. Honoré," giving him his card; "and if you call upon me there, at twelve o'clock this day week, we will endeavour to settle our differences, Mr. Vernon;" with which Lord Vancourt pursued his walk, meditating revenge for his late friend's insolence.

Vernon was equally bent on selling Lord Vancourt to the best advantage, unless he fulfilled his contract with him, as from his inability to grasp his unfortunate wife's money so readily as anticipated, he was obliged to resort to his usual method of bringing "grist to his mill," by aid of the dice box and cards. Lord Vancourt, after leaving Vernon, met an old acquaintance in the person of Major Stowell, who had just arrived in Paris, from London. "Ah, Vancourt," exclaimed the Major, "it is yourself, I suppose, although your face is confoundedly altered somehow."

"Got a smash on the nose, old fellow, from being thrown out of my cab three weeks ago."

"Won't do, Vancourt; we read and heard all about your failure with the heiress at the club—long account of it in the *Times*—I thought it a devilish plucky thing, and sorry you did not succeed. Ten thousand a-year was worth trying hard for—but how was it? we saw two different versions of the affair, one that the lady was willing—the other quite the reverse."

"The truth lies between the two, I believe," replied Lord Vancourt—"she would, and she would not; in fact, I was too much in a hurry, and that villain, Richard Vernon, I believe, sold me at last by putting her friends up to my moves, so that just as I was getting her into my own carriage, a lot of fellows bore down upon us—shot me through the arm, and have nearly, if not quite, killed one of my assistants."

"Devilish awkward business, Vancourt, and I hear Lord Malcolm swears he will transport you, if he can, for this attempt on his cousin."

"That he can't do, Stowell, as I have her guardian's letter, accepting my proposals for his ward, and wishing me success in my addresses."

"Well, that's something in your favour, Vancourt; but depend upon it, it is a serious matter; and if you will take my advice, don't show your face in England until the trial is over."

"The man I dread most of all," replied Lord Vancourt, "is Richard Vernon, who was staying with me at Marston Castle, and helped to plan the whole thing from beginning to end; and he declares, unless I pay him two hundred and fifty pounds as hush-money, on this day week, he will give Lord Malcolm a full account of the plot."

"Why, I met Vernon two nights ago at a gambling-house, here in Paris, when he won a large sum of money of Count B——, who swore there was foul play on Vernon's part, although unable to detect how; but he is determined to watch him narrowly for the future, and if detected in any tricks, I would not give much for Vernon's life-interest in fifty thousand pounds, the Count being a dead shot. But you had better find the money, Vancourt, and pay Vernon at once, or the consequences will be serious."

"It is out of my power to make up the sum in so short a time, unless luck favours me at the gaming-table. So what say you to meeting me to-night? and perhaps you will not object to introduce me to Count B——?"

"Oh, most willingly Vancourt. So now, *au revoir*, as I have a call or two to make."

A thought had suggested itself to Lord Vancourt, that, by an introduction to the Count, he might put him up to Vernon's tricks with dice and cards; and, when detected, a duel would be the inevitable result, in which he hoped to get quit of Vernon's importunities and threats together; believing, from Stowell's account of the Count's character, that nothing would satisfy him short of the death of the man who had already robbed him of so large a sum of money.

Punctual to his appointment, Major Stowell met Lord Vancourt at the gambling-house, where he soon had the opportunity of introducing Count B——, who was much pleased with his lordship's manner and address; and, as both had travelled a great deal, they were soon engaged in earnest conversation, and from that night became intimate friends. Vernon was there also; but, suspecting Lord Vancourt, he lost instead of winning, his usual run of luck appearing to have deserted him. Lord Vancourt also lost rather a considerable sum to the Count, which being immediately paid, put him in good humour with his new acquaintance.

The next day, Count B—— called on Lord Vancourt, who, after a few common-place observations, alluded to his want of success the previous night.

"Ah! milor," said the Count, who spoke English very imperfectly, "you lose to me, but your contreman, Monsieur

Vernon, play de very devil wid me de other night. Such luck I never see—he win every game, and clear my pocket so"—showing its empty inside.

"Most likely, Count. He is what we call a sharp, keen hand, and up to a trick or two."

"So I tink too, milor; but I could not see how de trick was done, which I would give a tousand francs to know."

"Well, Count, I do not want your money; and, as I consider such tricks downright robbery, I will put you up to them, provided you give me your word of honour never to mention my name."

"My goot Lord, I would not mention your name for de million francs."

Lord Vancourt then told him his suspicions that Vernon carried loaded dice in his sleeve, which, by a sleight of hand, were substituted for those on the board; and these, if marked before they began playing, would, of course, prove the fact."

"Ah! milor, I am so much oblige for de hint."

And he soon after took his leave.

Lord Vancourt, having put things in a train for the destruction, as he hoped, of his former ally, absented himself from the gaming-table, lest he might act as a counterpoise to the exposure, well knowing Vernon's suspicious and subtle disposition.

And a few nights after, being now sorely pressed for cash, Vernon, in playing with a friend of Count B——'s, again had recourse to his tricks, and was winning largely, when Count B—— entered the room. Hearing his friend's exclamations of surprise at Vernon's continual success, the Count watched him very intently; and discovering an unusual motion sometimes in his right hand before shaking the dice-box, he walked quickly round the table; and seizing Vernon's arm, suddenly tore up his sleeve, when four dice, instead of two, appeared on the board. In a moment, all gathered round the detected man; the Count, livid with passion, abusing him in broken English and German, swearing he would have instant satisfaction for the loss of his money.

Vernon was so thunderstruck at the sudden discovery of his villany, that he sat as one entranced for a moment, until roused by the insults and abuses poured upon his head, when he rose, and confronting the Count, accepted his challenge, and offered to fight any other man in the room who might feel himself aggrieved.

"Von at a time, sar," replied the Count. "I have de first claim on Monsieur Vernon; and I tink it vara likely he find me von too much; for I will have his life, or he must have mine, before we leave dis house."

The owner of the rooms now interfered, declaring no duel should take place there; an arrangement was therefore made for the hostile meeting in the Bois de Boulogne on the following morning, at an early hour: a young Irishman, named Fitzgerald, who was slightly known to Vernon, volunteering to act as his second. He made the necessary preparations of pistols, and engaged a friend of his own, a native of the Emerald Isle also, then practising as a surgeon in Paris, to attend, in case of accident to his principal.

About eight o'clock the next morning, which was dull and gloomy as the thoughts of Vernon, who, from his antagonist's hatred and well-known skill, dreaded a fatal issue to the combat, a carriage, containing himself, the surgeon, and Mr. Fitzgerald, drove rapidly up to the appointed place. The Count was on the ground before them, impatient to take vengeance on his adversary; but Fitzgerald, although, like the generality of his countrymen, as ready for a fray as a feast, knowing the Count's deadly aim, felt it incumbent on him to make some show at least of attempting to save the effusion of blood or loss of life; and, accordingly, asked the Count's second if a reconciliation could be effected. The offer was received with derision, which roused the Irishman's choler in an instant, who replied—

"I should ask that for another, sir, which I would not accept for myself; and I wish all here to remember that my overtures for a settlement have been rejected."

"Place your man, sir," was the reply. "We mean fighting, not talking."

Without another word, the ground being measured, the pistols were delivered by their seconds into the hands of the Count and Vernon, who stood fiercely surveying each other, the face of the latter being pale as death; but, knowing his life depended on a steady hand, by a violent effort he stifled every other thought, and awaited the signal. The intense, agonising suspense of such a moment, to a thinking mind, who can describe? Men rush into battle, facing death in every shape, even to the cannon's mouth; balls whistle round their heads, comrades fall beside them, wounded, disfigured, dying, dead; hand to hand, with flashing, bloody sword, the strife continues —no thought of fear or flinching for a moment crosses the soldier's mind—excited, maddened, he still presses on over heaps of slain. These men are fighting the battles of their country, not their own. They have no private vengeance to gratify, no private wrongs to redress, no fine-spun ideas of honour to maintain; but their war-cry is, "*Pro aris et focis*," for our altars and our homes.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE signal was given; both pistols were discharged simultaneously, making almost one report; and, as the smoke cleared away, Vernon was seen lying on the ground, shot through the body; and the Count staggered back into his second's arms, his opponent's ball having passed through his right shoulder, shattering the bone into splinters. In a moment, the surgeon, with Fitzgerald, was kneeling by Vernon's side; the former tearing open his waistcoat, whilst Fitzgerald supported his sinking head upon his knees.

"It's all over with him, Pat," exclaimed the doctor; "the bullet has passed through his lungs, I fear; but stay!" feeling his pulse, "he lives still! quick with the bottle; pour a little down his throat, if you can, whilst I stanch the blood." A faint sigh escaped the wounded man. "Ah!" cried the surgeon, "he revives! give him a little more of the liquid. By the powers! he's coming round; but, poor devil, with that air-hole through his body, recovery, I fear, is hopeless."

The Count's friend, seeing what was taking place, hurried him from the ground, believing Vernon to be mortally wounded, if not already dying; but from the pain and the resuscitating remedies used, the sufferer gradually recovered his consciousness, and begged, in a faint voice, to be carried home. His next inquiry was about the Count. "You winged him, Vernon," was his friend's reply; "but now, drink the rest of this bottle, and we will try and get you into the carriage; only don't attempt to speak any more just yet, as the doctor won't allow it."

Fitzgerald and his friendly assistant, O'Brien, having carried the wounded man to the carriage, placed him in a recumbent position, and by the aid of cushions and their over-coats, formed a tolerable couch for him to recline upon; and he was then driven back to his lodgings and placed in bed: Fitzgerald having preceded him, and prepared his young and timid wife for the calamity which had befallen her; who, almost frantic with grief and horror, implored to be allowed to see her husband, if only for one moment, to be assured he was not killed. "On my word of honour, my dear young lady," replied the kind-hearted Fitzgerald, taking her hand to prevent her leaving the room, "your husband is not killed, although seriously wounded; and any fresh excitement might be fatal; pray, be guided by me; you shall see him directly the doctor will allow you to do so: but let me entreat you, for his sake, to subdue your feelings as much as possible."

The surgeon, on examining his patient, discovered the ball lodged in his back, just under the skin, and it was, therefore, easily extracted, without much more suffering to Vernon's already tortured frame. Soon after his wound was dressed, he fell into a fitful doze; in which state he was left by the doctor, after having given all necessary directions to his wife's faithful maid how to treat him until his return.

For two days Vernon hovered between life and death; and, on the third day, being quite delirious, Fitzgerald called in one of the most eminent physicians of Paris, who pronounced his case almost hopeless. Still no efforts were relaxed to reduce this fevered state of body; and being blessed with a good constitution, the crisis was at last passed, and he began gradually, though slowly, to amend. During this severe trial to his young, affectionate wife, who loved her husband intensely (the only being around whom her young heart had ever been entwined, even from childhood), Fitzgerald, who became deeply interested in her helpless position, was a constant visitor at the house, saying and doing all in his power to alleviate the poignancy of her grief, watching, himself, by her husband's bedside during his delirium, day and night, until he was considered out of immediate danger. Her joy at the prospect of his recovery, and gratitude for Fitzgerald's care, were almost unbounded; and she would sit for hours together by her husband's bedside, with his hand in hers, and pour out her thanks for his rescue from a violent death. Even Vernon's stern, unfeeling nature gave way before the deep affection shown by this young, artless girl, whom he had seduced from her father's roof, more from the love of her money than any other feeling; but now, sobered down by the sufferings he had undergone, his heart responded to her fervent, deep attachment. "Oh! Emily," he would exclaim, "I am, indeed, unworthy your love and anxious care; but should my life be spared, I will endeavour to make some amends for the injury I have done you, in taking you from all your friends to link your fate with such a monster as myself."

"Oh, speak not thus, dearest Richard; you are all, everything to me; my father and mother have never loved me as you do."

"Well, poor child, I must try hard to recover now, for your dear sake, and repay you for all your gentle, loving attentions." Vernon was soothed and gratified by her unceasing attendance and endearing regard to every little comfort it was in her power to bestow, which greatly tended to his recovery, and he was soon permitted to sit up in his easy chair for a few hours during the day. Lord Vancourt, being apprised of the issue of the duel, called several times at Vernon's lodgings; and having on the third day met the doctors there, and been told that his case was hopeless, he immediately left Paris, dreading to be implicated in the affair, which was communicated to Vernon by Fitzgerald; and also that he had learnt from the Count's friend some additional information as to Lord Vancourt's putting the Count up to his tricks at play, and inciting him to challenge Vernon. Fitzgerald also hinted at the necessity of Vernon's applying to his friends for pecuniary assistance, as the tradesmen with whom he dealt, on hearing the cause of the duel, had refused to supply more goods, and were clamorous for their little accounts being settled. "I have done as much as I can to assist you, Mr. Vernon," added Fitzgerald, "more, I must confess, out of regard to your wife's wretched position; but now, as you are so far recovered, your own exertions are absolutely necessary to prevent her being left in a state of utter destitution; as, unknown to you, she wrote to her mother for pity and aid in her forlorn situation, to which no answer has been received."

Vernon, feeling grateful for Fitzgerald's kindness, made a full confession of his past delinquencies and Lord Vancourt's refusal to pay the money he promised for his assistance in the plot to carry off the heiress.

"It was a rascally business, Mr. Vernon," replied Fitzgerald, "and I must say you have only reaped your deserts for aiding to ruin a young, defenceless girl by throwing her into the power of such a scoundrel, who, by your own account, is suspected to be a married man. Even an Irishman, sir, wild and impetuous as we are, would never have been guilty of such an act as this."

"Well, then," said Vernon, "I will write to Lord Malcolm, and offer to give him every information about Lord Vancourt, on condition of his sending me a draft on some banker in Paris for two hundred pounds."

"Then, Mr. Vernon," said Fitzgerald, "I must beg, for the future, we may be strangers to each other, as we were before this unhappy affair."

"Stay, Fitzgerald; tell me what you would have me do, for I am indeed most grateful for all your undeserved kindness."

"Sign the letter I shall dictate, containing a full confession of your sorrow and contrition for your unmanly conduct, with all you know of Lord Vancourt and his proceedings, and the promise that you will give evidence, if required, at the trial, without any reservation or stipulation whatever. This, sir, is the course which any man, pretending to the name and character of a gentleman, would without hesitation pursue, and I shall add a postscript informing Lord Malcolm of your condition, and your wife's unfortunate and destitute state."

"It shall be done," said Vernon, without hesitation.

Fitzgerald then resumed his seat, and wrote from Vernon's mouth all the particulars, to which his own name and that of the servant girl were attached as witnesses.

"Very well, Vernon, that is a step in the right direction, and I trust the severe lesson you have received will prevent you ever again using false dice or conniving at the abduction of an inoffensive girl. You have now a young wife dependent on your rectitude of conduct, unless you would also consign her to misery and disgrace; throughout your severe sufferings this poor girl has watched and tended you, night and day, with all the care and anxiety of a ministering angel, and for her sake I implore you to lead a new life."

"I know and feel it all, Fitzgerald, and, for her sake, I now swear never to touch dice or cards again."

"Keep to your good resolution, Vernon; we may then still be friends, and you may rely on my assisting you in every way I can. Now no more—I will post the letter, and see you again in the morning."

A few days afterwards a letter was received from Lord Malcolm, expressing his sorrow for Vernon's deplorable situation, with a draft on his bankers in London for a hundred pounds, and, by the same post, a few lines from Will Beauchamp, enclosing a note for fifty pounds, which ran thus :—

> "VERNON,
>
> "I heartily forgive your ill-founded hatred towards myself, for which I never could assign a cause, and trust you may return to this country a happier and better man. Accept this trifle from yours truly,
>
> "WILLIAM BEAUCHAMP."

"There, Fitzgerald," said Vernon, handing him Beauchamp's letter; "that hurts and cuts me to the quick—that man I have injured, traduced, and vilified more than all, and it was from hatred to him that I joined in this infernal plot to give Miss Douglas into Vancourt's power, fearing she loved Beauchamp; envy and jealousy led me on, as I once tried hard to gain her myself."

"Well, Vernon, this is a pretty confession; but now, what are your present feelings towards him?"

"All that I can do to help his cause and Malcolm's shall be done."

"That's right, Vernon; you have been tramping long enough and too long to the tune of the 'Rogue's March,' and I hope you now see that 'Honesty is the best Policy.'"

Relieved of a load of care by these timely and unexpected remittances, Vernon felt more at ease, and next addressed a very penitential letter to Lord Mervyn, pleading his affection for his daughter as an excuse for his conduct in carrying her off; depicting in glowing colours her incessant care and anxiety about him when at the point of death, and expressing his resolution to lead a new life and devote all his energies to make her happy. He also stated that, to atone for his past conduct, he had made a confession to Lord Malcolm of his participation with Lord Vancourt in the plot to carry off Miss Douglas, without, however, revealing other names, as he had been most inhumanly treated by his lordship, who had conspired against his life, and left him almost dying in Paris without a shilling. On the receipt of this letter from his worthy son-in-law, Lord Mervyn became seriously alarmed, and fearing Vernon's vindictive character, thought he would be safer under his own eye than exposed to that of the opposing party; he therefore enclosed him a handsome sum of money to defray his travelling expenses when able to move, with an invitation to Marston Castle.

CHAPTER XX.

We must now cross the Channel to see what was occurring in the vicinity of Bampton. Thomas Carter, Lord Mervyn's footman, feeling uncomfortable in his situation as a suspected man, gave notice to leave; and Mark Rosier having mentioned this to Lord Malcolm, he was at once engaged by him; Mrs. Gordon willingly agreeing to receive him at the Priory until Malcolm's return to Scotland.

Lord Mervyn had invited as large a party of the neighbouring gentry as he could muster to a grand battue at the close of the shooting season, in which hundreds of pheasants and hares fell, the majority of which were packed off to the London markets.

William Beauchamp had assumed the reins of government over the pack, which was the reverse of being improved by Charles's mal-administration, who had only succeeded in bringing home the head of one fox after a fortnight's hunting, and, sooth to say, Charley himself was nothing loth to fall back into his old place of whipper-in. What with trying to ride or scream foxes to death (notwithstanding which they could not be prevailed on, like Mrs. Bond's ducks, to come to be killed), the hounds' heads got up to such an alarming height that Will Beauchamp found great difficulty in bringing down their high-wrought expectations to their proper level again, and he experienced almost as much trouble to reduce his field to their usual good order, the majority of the youngsters having, during the master's absence, considered themselves privileged to enact the part of huntsmen or whippers-in whenever they could get away from the old squire or Bob Conyers. If there were half a dozen foxes on foot in one covert, every one was vociferously cheered by the party who chanced to view his particular favourite across the drive, although the hounds might be running another in the very opposite direction; so pleased had some of these amateur huntsmen become with the sound of their own sweet voices, that the master was treated to such a concert of discordant halloes in all directions on his first appearance at the Barton Woods (where several foxes were on foot), that he sat for a few seconds in amazement, wondering to what extent this might lead; then putting spurs to his horse, and blowing his horn, he got the hounds together, and took them away from the covert to a large field, where he drew up and waited until he was surrounded by the greater portion of his followers.

"Now, gentlemen," exclaimed Beauchamp, addressing them in a loud voice, "as it is very evident that there are several persons out to-day who consider themselves more competent to hunt the hounds than myself, I shall be obliged by your informing me who is to be huntsman, that I may at once resign the horn to that individual, it being necessary, to prevent further confusion, that one man alone should act in that capacity."

The would-be huntsmen looked extremely foolish at this address; but no answer being returned, Beauchamp sat quietly on his horse, as if awaiting their reply.

"Come, come, Beauchamp," cried Sir Lucius, "don't mind those confounded fools' hallooing; but let us have a run this cold, shivery day."

"As you please, Gwynne; but I wish it to be clearly understood that, if I am to be huntsman, the first halloa I hear shall be the last this day, for I will immediately take the hounds home, which are already spoilt so much by this babel of tongues, that they won't even try to hunt a fox."

"Quite right," exclaimed Conyers and Coventry; "it is the only thing you can do to stop all this riot."

"Very well, gentlemen," said Beauchamp, "as you now know the terms, I will also try to get on terms again with my fox; and, Charles, I will thank you to bear in mind that you are now whipper-in."

"Yes, sir," said Charley, touching his cap very submissively.

"Ah, Mr. Conyers," exclaimed Farmer Stiles, "that's just what they all wanted, a bit of a lecture from the young squire; things will go on comfortable again after this."

On holding the hounds round the lower side of the covert, they struck upon the line of a fox which had gone away some ten or twelve minutes in the direction of Hazel Wood, about four miles distant, which Beauchamp, to punish his field as well as sober his hounds, made them hunt inch by inch; this produced the desired effect, as both men and hounds perceived their huntsman's determination to admit of no interference.

The fox, never having been pressed, jogged leisurely along, the pack improving in their pace until they reached Hazel Wood, where he had lingered for some time, enabling the hounds to get on better terms, when he broke, going straight for the forest six miles a-head.

"Now, then," shouted Bob Conyers, as he caught sight of the pack streaming away, "come on, you thrusting scoundrels, —now's your time—let 'em go—no more hold hards to day;" and down rattled the first division of light cavalry, charging their fences with long pent-up impatience. The hounds, however, having got the start, seemed resolved to keep it, and the brook being brim full and over after a heavy night's rain, the casualties which occurred there were rather more numerous than usual, there being *multi*, instead of "*rari nantes in gurgite vasto*," few who rode at it escaping without a ducking. The Captain and Coventry took their plunge as usual; some rode at it fast, others walked their horses into the stream, the banks of which could not be discerned; but all landed safely on the other side, and again set to work to catch the hounds, which few were destined to see any more that day. The forest was reached; but the fox, disdaining its protection, passed through one corner of it, and boldly faced the open, into the neighbouring hunt, taking their huntsman entirely out of his reckoning, as to the point he contemplated reaching, and everything now depending on the staunchness of the pack.

Will Beauchamp interfered as little as possible in two or three checks which occurred, and five or six miles of new country had now been crossed at a good hunting pace after leaving the forest.

"Where," exclaimed Conyers, "can the fox be travelling to, Will? he must be out of his latitude as well as ourselves; although as to longitude, confound him! he still seems holding on straight enough."

"He has run me out of my geography, Bob; although there is, I believe, a strong covert somewhere in the direction he is now going, belonging to the H—— Hunt, which I conclude is his point."

"Ah! well, this proves what a good fox can do, when he has a fair start and is not hurried over the first five miles. Your bursts of twenty or thirty minutes are all very well sometimes, but give me a good hunting run like this; look, there is a likely covert, just a few fields ahead—please the pigs, we don't change there."

"No, no, we shall book him yet. Now, Charley, to the further end of it, and mind you don't halloa a fresh fox."

Here the hounds, for the first time, got up with their game, and gave him such a rattling, that he broke away again, running for some open downs above the vale. For two miles the pace was terrific; the hounds, with heads up, and sterns down, running hard for their game, which they knew must be sinking, and on ascending the hill side, he was viewed, not a hundred yards before the leading couples, and in a few seconds both disappeared over the brow of the hill. Few were there, however, to witness this sight; Will Beauchamp, Conyers, the whips, Gwynne, and Tyler, with two or three farmers, being all that remained, out of a very large field, to go in and finish. At the foot of the hill, Beauchamp at once dismounted to relieve his horse, which was nearly beaten, leading him up the ascent, his example being followed by all the others, except young Farmer Hazel, who still kept spurring his poor jaded animal.

"Come along, squire," shouted he, on passing; "I shall be first to see the finish."

"Of your horse, Hazel, in five minutes, unless you jump off his back directly." The words had scarcely passed Beauchamp's lips, before the horse reeled and fell under his rider, who had hardly time to jump from the saddle ere he lay dead before him. "I hope, Hazel," said Beauchamp, "that will be a lesson to you through life, never to ride another willing horse to death," as the young farmer stood in silent dismay surveying the dead carcase of his too honest animal. The example and warning were not lost on the rest, and Beauchamp exclaimed, "There is no occasion to hurry now, as the hounds have killed their fox."

On gaining the summit of the hill, the pack was seen about a mile a-head on the open ground in a group, despatching the remains of as gallant a fox as ever broke covert. Beauchamp and Conyers, with Stiles, trotted leisurely down to the spot, which Charley had already reached with Gwynne and Tyler, both light weights on thorough-bred horses.

"By Jove!" shouted Bob, in an ecstacy of delight, "this is a most glorious wind-up to the very best run I have ever seen in my life. Now, Gwynne, what do you say to Will being a d——d slow coach, in making his hounds hunt out the line for the first three or four miles?"

"I say, Bob, he is a much cleverer hand in dealing with a pack of hounds than I am with a pack of cards, and few can beat me at that game. But how are we, Bob, as to the topographical?"

"Not quite at the Land's End yet, but over thirty miles from home, as I saw the town of Snowdon to our right, when we were climbing the hill."

Lord Malcolm and Fred Beauchamp now straggled in, having taken a wrong turn round the last covert; and as this small party, with the hounds, returned to the verge of the hill overlooking the vale, other horsemen were seen still struggling through the heavy fences, some at a slow canter, and others brought to a trot or walk; and to put a stop to their further exertions, Will Beauchamp stood with the hounds a few minutes on the summit, sending forth one loud "whohoop," which might have been heard at Snowdon.

"Demmit!" exclaimed the Captain to Melville and Coventry, who were all in turn playing at "catch my horse, can't you?" "That's Will's yell, for a thousand! They have got him somewhere; but, 'pon honour—eh! aw! Narcissus—demmit all—he's buried in this infernal dyke—help, Melville, quickly, or he'll be smothered!"

By the exertions of all three, Narcissus was at last dragged out, more dead than alive, and lay at full length on the green-sward, it appearing to be a matter of perfect indifference to him whether he made any further effort to rise.

"There, Markham," said Melville, "we cannot wait any longer, so you and Narcissus must settle the point between you, whether you sleep here or not; my advice is to put the whip into him, and drive him on before you till you get into the turnpike road, which is within half a mile of us."

The Captain was not the only person employed in this agreeable occupation of trudging along on foot with a beaten horse, when Beauchamp and the pack, with the fortunate few entered on the high road leading to Snowdon.

"Ah, Markham," asked the master, "what's the matter—shoe lost?"

"Demmed near a horse lost, Beauchamp; regularly done up—worm crusher now—no Lifeguardsman—demmit! sha'n't get home for a week at this pace."

"Here, then, Markham, let Jack have your horse to lead into the town, and you shall ride his."

"Thank'ee, Beauchamp, but I don't like taking away your man."

"Never mind, we don't want his services now, so get up at once."

Every stable in Snowdon was occupied that night with horses so thoroughly knocked up that they could proceed no further, traps of all kinds being hired to convey their owners home, whilst others remained there until the next morning; the run from point to point being at least twenty miles, and the ground traversed not less than five or six more.

"Well, Will," inquired Malcolm, "what do you purpose doing?"

"Give the horses a bucket of gruel each, with a mouthful of hay, and then homewards."

"What, thirty miles more to-night for hounds and horses, after such a run?"

"Just so, Malcolm; they are of the right sort not to give in; but it won't do to let them get stiff by loitering about at a public-house. Quick march, is our motto, and I hope to be home before the supper hour in the servant's hall."

"Very well, then Bob and I will overtake you on the road, and bring Markham with us."

Beauchamp was too good a sportsman, and by far too fond of his hounds and horses, to consign them to the care of servants, however trustworthy, after a severe day, always accompanying them home, and feeding the hounds himself before he left the kennels. He therefore jogged leisurely along with his pets, which once more cheered by the presence of their young master among them, trotted on with sterns erect, as if ready for a second fox.

The system adopted by Beauchamp in the management of his pack was of the silent order, with as little interference as possible in the field, to which must be attributed their uniform success in killing their foxes. Noise in man or hound being his aversion, he would allow of no holloaing or screaming from his field, which invariably occasions so much confusion, and the hounds were thrown silently into covert, and only spoken to occasionally to assure them of their master's presence. Although a fine melodious voice may be very pleasing to the ear, yet instead of its being (as too often considered) a great recommendation in a huntsman to a pack of fox-hounds, it is most decidedly the reverse, particularly in a woodland country, where, in nine cases out of ten, the fox will be unkenneled by the huntsman instead of his hounds. We cannot so arrange, when the fixtures are made some time before, always or very often to draw up wind; and a noisy, vociferous huntsman, when taking a line of coverts down wind, will disturb every fox (unquestionably every good one) long before the pack can get upon his drag; in fact, a good fox will be off, and perhaps miles away, before the hounds reach his kennel. It is related of the famous Butterwick Jack, a fox which had beaten Mr. Farquarson's hounds in Dorsetshire for several consecutive seasons, that upon the slamming of a gate or the sound of a horse's hoofs near the covert, he broke instantly away; and notwithstanding every precaution and the entire silence of the huntsman when throwing his pack into covert, Jack was ever on the look-out for squalls, and made so good a start that he invariably beat his pursuers, and saved his precious carcase from their fangs. To prevent foxes being chopped in small spinnies or gorse coverts, a few cracks from the first whipper-in's whip, as he approaches them, will be quite sufficient to make any fox on the alert which is worth hunting, and here, of course, a good huntsman will make rather more use of his voice. Foxes, however, like weasels, are seldom caught napping, except, perhaps, on a very windy day, and even then very rarely indeed.

Another part of Will Beauchamp's system was to stick to his hunted fox, whether good, bad, or indifferent. Bob Conyers would sometimes remonstrate when he was hammering away at a dodging brute, ringing round covert.

"Leave him for another day, Will; we want a gallop to warm us this cold morning."

"Bad habits grow upon foxes as well as men, Bob; and unless I finish this brute off now, he will be much harder to kill the next time we meet him, and I don't want any more of his stock left in the country."

The common practice of chopping and changing from one scent to another, leaving a half-beaten fox in covert, and taking the hounds off to find a fresh one, is very prejudicial to the pack, causing them to lose confidence in themselves, and almost as bad as lifting them to halloas. Hounds often treated in this manner are always on the look-out for assistance when in difficulties, and will never persevere with a bad scent. A pack in the adjoining county to Beauchamp's, with a wild huntsman, were one day at fault, when a loud shouting was heard from a man on a hay-rick. "Hark holloa!" screamed the huntsman, and away want his darlings, best pace up to the hay, now followed by all the field helter-skelter for another start.

"Where's the fox gone?" shouted the huntsman.

"I ha'an't seed no fox, sur."

"Then what the devil made you halloa?"

"The ould gentleman heself, I do believe; and he'd a made yoh hallo, if you'd seen un, as I did, spring off the cut of hay; the hair riz up on my head, like a hog's bristles."

"What does the fool mean?" asked the huntsman, in a furious passion.

"Why, I do'an't know what it manes, but I tell ye, when I put the ladder agin the mow, a long-tailed crittur jumped out of the nich of hay, and cut away into yonder copse, and the very sight of un was enow to make anybody holler; but, dang it! look—there hur zits in thick big oak."

And, on the horsemen riding to the wood hedge, a large baboon was seen sitting in the tree, chattering and making faces at his friends below.

"Ha! ha! ha!" shouted Tom Larking, a leading man in the hunt, "a devilish good joke, Jem, to be halloed on to a monkey! but, hang it, let's have him out. He'll show us a run, now we have lost our fox.

"My hounds run a monkey, sir!" exclaimed Jem, indignantly. "They ain't come to that pass yet, any ways."

"I'll bet five to one they do run him, though, Jem," persisted Larkins; but Jem, fearing mischief, trotted briskly away to find another fox, leaving Jacko to be handled by any one else who fancied him.

Whatever may be said of Will Beauchamp's system of hunting, the result was that his pack seldom required, and never expected, assistance from their huntsman; very few foxes being able to escape them.

CHAPTER XXI.

For some days after, the great run from the Barton Woods was the favourite topic among all sportsmen in that locality; but the all-engrossing subject to the ladies was the Grand Union Hunt Ball, under the management of a committee chosen from the members of the four adjoining hunts.

The ball-room at Cherrington being inadequate to contain half the company expected on this great occasion, the Town Hall, which stood over the market house, was put in requisition, and the large space underneath was boarded over and enclosed for a supper-room. The preparations made for this grand re-union of fox-hunters were on a magnificent scale, and the decorations for the rooms costly and appropriate. Being the first thing of the sort attempted in that neighbourhood, the committee spared neither trouble nor expense in their arrangements, being determined, in the spirit of true sportsmen, that the thing should be done well—and well it was done. The members of each hunt had the option of appearing in their respective dress coats, but the general company were requested to be in uniform or fancy costume. The highest families for many miles in every direction sought eagerly for cards of admission to this splendid *fête*, which were only at first obtainable from members of the four hunts; but it was deemed advisable in some cases to depart from this rule, and an additional number was issued for persons of distinction residing within prescribed limits; and more than one fox-killing *pater familias* was fairly run down by wife and daughters all at him at once, and obliged to promise never to destroy another fox.

The gentlemanly conduct of the committee, who did all in their power to accommodate the numerous applicants having any pretensions, from property or influence in the county, to ask for tickets, was the general theme of conversation, and the Grand Union Ball became the subject of great interest in the most fashionable circles for weeks previously.

Beauchamp sent two of his tickets to Mrs. Gordon and Blanche, reserving one for Sir Francis Burnett, who had promised to attend; and Lord Malcolm, to propitiate the Harcourts, enclosed two also for their acceptance. The anxiously expected evening at length arrived, and by ten o'clock the rooms were crowded with as gay and brilliant an assemblage as ever graced a ball-room; the costumes of the ladies being of the most *recherchée* and elegant description.

Blanche and her friend Constance appeared in the simple Scotch costume of white muslin and tartan. Selina Markham assumed the character of a lady of George the Second's reign, figuring away with Bob Conyers in a minuet, similarly disguised in the attire of a courtier of that period. Her sister Caroline, with the Rollestons and a friend on a visit, represented the seasons of the year, and formed a quadrille which was much admired; but, beyond these, it were needless to attempt a description of the various costumes and character's, borrowed almost from every age and every clime, which graced and enlivened the festive scene.

Of the gentlemen, the most conspicuous was William Carrington, the master of the S. W. hunt, whose towering height and immense proportions attracted all eyes.

"Ah! Carrington," exclaimed Beauchamp, shaking him by the hand, "glad to see you! All ready to trip it on the light fantastic toe, I suppose?"

"I don't come here, Beauchamp, to make a fool of myself by attempting such a feat as that (which suits only herring-made fellows like yourself), but to see my friends—besides, unless there were extra props to the floor, a few hops and skips on these rickety boards, from a man of twenty stone, would send you all down to the regions below. There's a clever pack to look at got together here, particularly the B—— ladies, I mean"—correcting himself—"although they don't match as to colour. Handsome, fine-shaped girls, eh, Beauchamp?"

"Yes, I think the B—— pack before us (as you call them) such a lot as is rarely seen in one room."

"Well, Beauchamp, but I want to see the heroine or heiress who so nearly ran you to ground. They say she is a clipper; and I wish you would point her out to me."

"I will introduce you to her presently, Carrington," replied Beauchamp; "but now my hands are full of business."

Lord and Lady Seaton (acquaintances of the Harcourts, who lived about twenty miles from Cherrington) were invited to Throseby for this grand event, with the Marquis of Danby, who was then staying with them, a young nobleman of great promise, now in his twenty-fourth year, and who held a commission in the Life Guards. Lord Danby was about the general standard as to height, although rather slightly formed; aristocratic looking, with handsome features and very pleasing manners; and although his father, the Duke of Delamere, was still in the prime of life, the heir to a dukedom was, of course, eagerly coveted by many mammas in the highest circles, who had daughters to dispose of. Lord Danby was, however, too cautious and sensible to be caught by mere personal beauty, or that greater attraction in the present day—money. He was, moreover, very partial to field sports, and a determined fox-hunter; and having heard from Lord Seaton of the Union Hunt Ball, he came down purposely for the occasion.

Mrs. Harcourt, as may be supposed, rose a hundred per cent. in her own estimation, when entering the room that night, leaning on the arm of such a lion as the Marquis of Danby, whom she sought an early opportunity of introducing to Mrs. Gordon and her niece, parading him with an air of great dignity and importance, which was considerably diminished when Lord Danby shook hands with Beauchamp in the most friendly manner, who just then approached to claim Blanche for his partner in the opening dance of the night.

Lord Danby, being very much struck at first with Blanche's entreme loveliness (enhanced that evening by her simple, unaffected costume), begged the honour of dancing the next quadrille, which was acceded to. On leading his partner away, she asked Beauchamp the name of the gentleman who had just been introduced by Mrs. Harcourt, which she had imperfectly heard.

"The Marquis of Danby, Blanche, son of the Duke of Delamere," was the reply.

"You know him, William, I see."

"Yes, dear girl, I have met him occasionally in the hunting field, and his father and mine are old acquaintances; but I am at a loss to conceive how he can be staying at Throseby—that, however, I will ascertain presently."

Lord Danby, not seeing much fun in being paraded any longer by Mrs. Harcourt, took the earliest opportunity of consigning her to a seat, and soon after encountered Captain Markham.

"Ah, Danby! 'pon honour—quite astonished to find you here—grand affair, eh!—well got up, and all that sort of thing. But where are you staying, old fellow?"

"At the Harcourts, Markham, with my friends, the Seatons, who were invited to Throseby for this ball."

"Ah! ah! I see. Old Harcourt is well enough in his way—gives good spreads, and keeps a first-rate artist in the culinary; but that match-making, haughty wife of his is my aversion, 'pon honour."

"Very likely," replied Danby; "but I hear you have had splendid sport in this part of the world."

"Yaas, Danby, first-rate, and no mistake—such a run from our wood—thirty miles at least—every horse beaten—some killed—others can't show—Narcissus regularly floored."

"Well, Markham, I feel inclined to send for my horses down here, and have a week or two with you, if I can get good stabling in the neighbourhood."

"That you can, my lord, I will answer for; at Barton Court our stalls are not half filled, and you shall have a stable to yourself, and a right good welcome from my governor."

"No, no, Markham, I cannot do that."

"And why not, Danby, eh?—oh, I see—Duke's son—won't condescend—*infra dig.*—and all that sort of thing."

"No, on my honour, Markham, that was not my reason for refusing your friendly offer."

"Then, demmit, Danby, there can be no other; but here comes Sir Lionel, as game an old cock as ever wore spurs."

Markham, having introduced his father to Lord Danby, left them together, saying, "There, governor, Danby wants to see our pack, so hold him by the button until he promises to spend a month at Barton Court."

Lord Danby was so much pleased with the urbanity of the old baronet that he at last accepted the invitation, and stood listening to his account of their great run, until Beauchamp, having finished his dance, was leading Blanche back to her aunt. If Lord Danby was at first so much taken with Blanche's loveliness of person, he was much more captivated with her artless, unaffected manners and cheerful, unsophisticated mind, which made him desire to be more intimately acquainted with her, and at the end of their dance he pleaded for a second, which was not refused, Blanche being much pleased with his quiet gentlemanly demeanour, and thinking, as a friend of Beauchamp's, there could be no impropriety in accepting him a second time for her partner. It unfortunately so happened that Beauchamp had previously engaged Blanche for the sixth quadrille, which not noticing, from a waltz intervening, she had taken to mean the *seventh* dance, unwittingly accepting both him and Lord Danby for the same set; and as Beauchamp was hurrying through the crowd in search of his partner when the time arrived, he found her with Lord Danby just taking their position in the set then forming, Lord Malcolm and Constance standing near.

"I think," said Beauchamp, in a low tone to her, "you are engaged to me for this quadrille."

"Oh, no, William, you must have made a mistake, as this is the seventh dance."

"But only the sixth quadrille," added Beauchamp, "which you promised me, did you not, Blanche?"

"Yes," she replied, "I recollect now that was the case, but as it did not occur to me when I accepted Lord Danby, I do not know how I can well refuse to dance with him, since we have taken our places."

"Well, then, Blanche, will you dance the next quadrille with me?"

"For that I am engaged to Captain Melville."

"The succeeding one, then?"

"I have promised that to Major Hammond."

"Ah, yes, I see," exclaimed Beauchamp, in an offended tone, "your engagements to me are to be broken, but not to others."

And he was turning indignantly away, when Lord Danby said, "I fear, Beauchamp, there is some misunderstanding with Miss Douglas and yourself about this quadrille, and if you have a prior claim to mine, which I gather from your words, I will, although most reluctantly, resign her hand for this set, trusting to be more fortunate in another."

"Oh no," replied Beauchamp, "Miss Douglas has made her election in favour of your lordship. although previously engaged to me, and of course therefore I must retire," with which he turned haughtily round and left them.

Lord Malcolm, who was near enough to hear all that passed between Blanche and Beauchamp, looked serious. Blanche was so hurt as to be ready to cry, and Lord Danby, although flattered by her preference for him, felt rather uncomfortable. "I am really sorry," he observed to Blanche, "for this unpleasant misunderstanding, but I hope you will acquit me of the least intentional offence to Mr. Beauchamp."

"It is entirely my fault," replied Blanche. "I remember now I did promise Mr. Beauchamp the sixth quadrille, which this unfortunately is, although the seventh dance."

"Oh, never mind, Blanche," whispered Malcolm; "I will set this mistake right with Beauchamp presently, although he is confoundedly captious sometimes, and here I fear he has been treated rather unceremoniously; as I think, having the first claim, you should have waived that of the Captain or Major in his favour, at least, or have at once accepted his arm in place of Lord Danby's."

"But really, Charles, I did not intend to offend him, although wishing to avoid being considered rude by Lord Danby when the set was formed."

"No, my dear girl, that I hope he does not believe, and I will endeavour to smooth down this unpleasantness."

After the quadrille was concluded, Malcolm sought his friend, trying to persuade him to ask Blanche for another dance, which he hoped might be the means of reconciling this little difference.

"No, Malcolm," he replied, "I will sue no further, having done so three times in vain; and when positively in the right, to be postponed even for a Duke's son is not very palatable."

"Come, come, Beauchamp, don't give way to temper."

"No, Malcolm, temper has little to do with my present feelings, which are acute enough, without your accusing me of being bad-tempered—that I am not, and never have been, although I can feel an insult from those I love more deeply than any man living. But now I am engaged, and must go in search of my partner."

As he turned away, Malcolm said, "Mind, Beauchamp, you are of our party to the supper-table;" to which no answer was returned.

On Malcolm's seeking Blanche, whom he found sitting with her Aunt Gordon, she anxiously inquired, "Well, Charles, have you succeeded in pacifying William?"

"No, dear girl, I am sorry to say I have not yet prevailed; he seems exceedingly hurt, and says you refused him three times, and that you ought at once to have taken his arm, instead of Lord Danby's, as being positively engaged to him before his lordship. This admits of no doubt, Blanche; and he also feels very much annoyed that you should have shown so distinguishing a mark of favour to Lord Danby, by accepting him for two dances so close upon each other, contrary to etiquette and his advice, and thereby placing him you have known so long in an inferior position to an acquaintance of a few hours. This is too true, my dear girl, and Beauchamp, with all his warm, generous feelings, although most sensitive, is also most determined, and will put up with no slight or indifference from those he loves."

"Indeed, indeed, Charles," replied Blanche, with the tears standing in her eyes, "I did not intend, as you must know, either to offend or slight William; but I thought it would appear so very rude to Lord Danby to refuse dancing with him when we had taken our places."

"Yes, Blanche, that may be all very true; but recollect, it is far better to appear rude to a stranger than to act unkindly and unfairly to one of the dearest friends you will ever find in this world; and had Constance treated me as you have Will Beauchamp, I don't know what would have been the consequence; for I tell you plainly it would have put me in a terrible passion."

"Oh, Charles, I am indeed miserable that you should also think so hardly of me," replied poor Blanche; "but pray, go and tell William I am sorry in having offended him, that I will hold myself bound to dance with him before any other person, and will sit down until I have first fulfilled my promise to himself."

At this moment Captain Melville approached to claim her hand, when she pleaded a bad headache, and begged to be excused dancing with him till after supper, when, if better, she would be happy to accept him as a partner. "Independent of which," she said, quietly yet firmly, "I have made a great mistake in the dances to-night, and was really engaged to Mr. Beauchamp before you asked me."

As Melville, with a low bow, withdrew, Malcolm applauded Blanche for her resolution in acting so firmly and honourably towards her lover, even at the risk of offending others, and said, "Now, Blanche, you are on even terms again; and should Beauchamp decline your proffered olive branch, I shall take part against him."

Malcolm was not long in explaining to Beauchamp his cousin's regret for what had occurred, and her determination to dance with no other until she had fulfilled her engagement to himself; which brought him to her side immediately—softened, although not satisfied. Blanche held out her hand as he approached, and on his sitting down, she candidly admitted her fault, and want of consideration, in dancing with Lord Danby.

"Pray say no more, Blanche; you have a perfect right to please yourself, and I have no pretensions to dictate to you; but as you were so averse to behave rudely, as you thought, to Lord Danby, you will of course feel equally reluctant to offend either Captain Melville or Major Hammond, to whom you told me you were engaged for the next two dances; and therefore, to avoid any more unpleasantness to yourself (as I find you have already refused Melville on my account), I will explain to him how the matter really stood between us, and take my chance after supper. Don't you think, Malcolm," asked Beauchamp, appealing to him, "this is the proper course to pursue, to avoid further remarks?"

An assent being given, Beauchamp went in search of Melville, when Malcolm observed to Blanche, "He is stiff and formal still, dear girl, and my impression is you will find him so for some little time; but take my advice, don't ever dance twice with a stranger to his seclusion, for he is confoundedly jealous and particular in some things, and as haughty as a prince when treated with indifference; but here he comes," as Beauchamp again approached, saying Captain Melville consented to take his turn after the Major; "and now, Blanche," taking a card and pencil from his pocket, "if you will, on due reflection, mark any one dance on the list after supper, and give it to me on my return, I will hold myself engaged to you, even though it should be the very last."

"You are not going to leave us again now, William," said Mrs. Gordon; "I have not seen you the whole evening; so sit down with me a little, unless you prefer strangers to your aunt."

"No, dear aunt, that is not my character, you well know; those I profess to love, I love deeply and for ever, and no stranger can ever induce me to waver for one moment in my affections or respect to those who are entitled to my esteem and confidence."

Soon after, Major Hammond came up, offering his arm to Blanche; and when they were alone, Mrs. Gordon said, "You have sufficiently punished dear Blanche for her trifling error, to-night, William, and you are now more severe to her than she deserves."

"The happiness of life, dear aunt, depends on trifles apparently as light as air; and the disposition is shown as much in little things as in great events; and you see my anticipations about Blanche are being realised. I fear it will be some time before she really knows her own mind. What! ought Lord Danby, or a dozen lords, to influence her conduct towards one she professes to love, and make him insignificant in the presence of a perfect stranger! A woman cannot love the man she would help to humiliate. No, no, aunt; it harasses me to think more about Blanche's treatment, which has sunk deep in my heart. No sooner have I risked my life to save her from one lord than I am nearly involved in a quarrel with another, whom she thinks proper to patronise and place on an equal, if not a superior, footing to myself; but from this night Blanche is free to act as she pleases, without the least reference to me, as I will never presume to advise or influence her for the future; in fact, I believe she does not rightly yet understand her own feelings towards me, which, most probably, are those of sisterly regard only, as she appears to be much taken, at first sight, with Lord Danby."

"William, you are now not only severe but unjust also, and are magnifying a trifle into a serious offence. Blanche has atoned and suffered most severely for her error, and it was all I could do to console her. Will you make me also miserable, as well as herself?"

"No, dear aunt, I will say no more; perhaps I have said too much."

"Then you will be kind to her as usual, when she returns; and be once again my own dear William?"

"Yes, my kindest of friends; I would not pain you for the world, and you shall have no cause to find fault with me again to-night."

When Blanche returned with her partner, Beauchamp rose and received her with his usual kind manner, and taking her hand in his, whispered, "I have been too severe upon you, dear Blanche; will you forgive my excited feelings?"

"Yes, indeed, dear William, I do, for I know I have acted very wrong, and have dreaded lest I might involve you in a quarrel by my wavering conduct; but it shall never be repeated, if you will trust me for the future; my experience of the world makes me feel the want of your kind, friendly advice, which never again shall be disregarded, to do what I feel to be right, not what it may be convenient to do. And now, to show you my contrition for treating you so cavalierly, I will, after fulfilling my engagement to Captain Melville, accept no other partner but yourself for the remainder of the evening."

"That, indeed, I cannot allow, Blanche."

"But you cannot help it, William," she said gaily; "my resolution is taken, and being a right one, it shall not be broken."

"Well, dear girl, we will talk of that presently, as Melville is approaching; but bear in mind you are of our party at the supper-table, where I have reserved places; so return to us immediately your dance is finished, or even before, if you see a movement in that direction."

Melville was rallying Blanche on her forgetfulness of her engagements that evening, in the last figure of the quadrille, when, seeing a rush towards the door leading to the supper-room, she hastily said, "I must join my party, Captain Melville, this moment, which is an engagement I made before entering this room, and therefore I am of course bound to keep before all others."

"Oh, never mind, there will be plenty of time yet, and I will find you a place."

"Then I must go without you, as I certainly shall not offend my Aunt Gordon by not being ready to attend her as I promised."

"Oh, Miss Douglas, I cannot allow you to go alone, and will of course attend you."

Constance and Mrs. Gordon, with Malcolm and Beauchamp, met them as they were returning, when the latter said, "There is room for you at our table, Melville, if you will join our party."

"Most willingly, Beauchamp," was the reply; and in this order, Mrs. Gordon having Beauchamp's arm, they descended the stairs to the supper-room, when Melville whispered to Blanche, "I do not now regret the interruption to our dance, as it has afforded me the enviable position of sitting near you and basking in the sunshine of those smiles I value beyond all price."

"Pray spare me such fulsome compliments, Captain Melville," said Blanche, loud enough for Beauchamp to hear; "I do not like fine speeches;" which stopped the Captain from any further attempts in that line.

CHAPTER XXII.

Four long tables were arranged in the supper-room for the members of the four hunts, at the head of which each master presided; and Will Beauchamp took his place, with Mrs. Gordon on one hand, and Blanche on the other, at the head of his table: the old squire sitting next to Blanche, and Malcolm on the other side, below Mrs. Gordon; next in succession came Sir Lionel Markham, with his party, Sir Francis Burnett, Gwynne, and other members of the hunt, Bob Conyers facing William Beauchamp as vice-president at the lower end, around whom all the youngsters (as Bob called them) were congregated with their partners. Of eatables and potables there was a grand display; with a profusion of game, wild fowl, &c., with the usual accompaniments of confectionary exhibited on such occasions, to which, when the company had paid ample attention, the toasts of the evening succeeded. The health of the ladies was of course received with rapturous applause, for which Bob Conyers returned thanks on their behalf in a very humorous and gallant speech, being the oldest bachelor of the company, jocosely taking his date from the age of George the Second.

"You behold, ladies and gentlemen," said Bob, "in your humble servant a true specimen of the bashful man, who has had the misfortune to be in love ever since entering his *teens*, and who has now advanced very deep into the *ties*, without being tied up himself; the fact is, ladies, I never could muster courage to pop the question, for, when the time arrived for popping, the cork would never come out; in short, I am like a stale bottle of stout, there's no pop left in me; and then as to a choice—these lines are continually running in my head—

'How happy could I be with either,
Were t'other dear charmer away!'

My sensitive and soft heart is ever receiving impressions, but the wax is always melting, for it ain't like cobbler's wax, which keeps many a man in the saddle. This very night I have fallen in love ten times, at least, already; and were I offered the selection of all the beauty here assembled on this auspicious occasion to do us honour, for my life I could never make up my mind, ladies, which to choose, as you all appear so irresistibly bewitching. I see some men looking unutterably soft things, and others whispering exceedingly foolish ones to their fair partners, whilst I am standing by my unfortunate partner's side like an oaf, twisting and twirling her fan (I believe I have broken half a dozen to-night); but the very attempt to make love absolutely chokes me; in short, unless some kind soul, pitying my distressed situation, does actually propose for me, Bob Conyers must continue a bachelor to the end of the chapter. It behoves me now, gentlemen, on behalf of the ladies, to express their thanks for the compliment paid them, and the married who have experienced the felicity of connubial bliss offer their matronly advice to all their younger sisters to change their state as soon as possible; and my advice to young bachelors is to take warning by the fate of Bob Conyers, and to strike while the iron is warm and pliable."

The next toast was fox-hunting: to which no one for some time appeared inclined to respond, each master expecting the other would rise; but Beauchamp, being the youngest, knew very well he could not be required to do so, out of respect to his seniors. The Honourable Mr. Manvers, master of the V—— Hunt, at length stood up, and thus addressed the company:—

"Ladies and gentlemen, one would suppose, from the dead silence among the masters of fox-hounds, that not one of them could give tongue; whereas, to my certain knowledge, all possess stentorian lungs except myself, who am unfortunately a squeaker. The master of the C—— Hunt is notoriously a very fast man across country, greatly my senior in years, and my superior in sporting achievements—quick enough to speak his mind in the field without much ceremony or circumlocution;

and of course, therefore, the most proper person to return thanks on this occasion: but he is evidently a timid, bashful man in ladies' society; and although looking as fierce as a lion at fences, I fear, like my friend Conyers, he will never muster courage to pop the question. Then there's the master of the S. W. Hunt, who, if he could be prevailed on to open his mouth, must be a speaker of great weight, his longitude and latitude being of the Anak order, and I may say, 'Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt, and resolve itself into a *speech*.' (A murmur from Carrington, "That's my infirmity, sir.") Lastly, there is the master of the hunt in whose district we have assembled, who, by all accounts, can fight, if he can't speak in defence of the ladies."

After some flattering remarks on the fair sex, Manvers resumed his seat.

A move was soon after made; and, as the ladies were leaving, Blanche whispered Beauchamp—

"You will find me disengaged, William, whenever you return."

"No, no, my dear Blanche, this must not be. Do not think me so unreasonable."

"It must be so, dear William, until you join us;" on which she took her aunt's arm.

Beauchamp, from his position as president, was obliged to continue his sitting at his table during the delivery of a few other toasts, much to his annoyance; as several gentlemen had already deserted to the more agreeable society of the fair sex in the ball-room; who, from the movement heard overhead, were evidently much more pleasantly occupied than in listening to the drones who were attempting to utter dull speeches below.

Manvers, determined to have the master of the C—— Hunt on his legs, proposed his health, which, after being duly honoured, forced him to rise.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began. ("The ladies are gone," was shouted out.) "I beg pardon—well, then, gentlemen, I'll begin again. Ladies and gentlemen." (Shouts of laughter.)

"Let him have it," cried Gwynne, "that's his text; he can't preach from any other. Now then, old cock, out with it. We give you, ladies and gentlemen." (Shouts of laughter—"Order, order," from Sir Francis Burnett—"Hear, hear," from Gwynne.)

"Gentlemen," said the master of the C—— Hunt, "for the honour you have done me, in drinking my health, I return you my best thanks, and beg to say—that (another pause)—I beg to say that I feel"—another pause—when a voice replied—

"A bigger fool than I ever thought myself."

Roars of laughter again burst forth, during which the master of the C—— Hunt resumed his seat in a violent passion; and thus this speechifying terminated.

Lord Danby was one of the first to quit the supper-table, Blanche Douglas having thrown a spell of fascination over him, which made him most anxious to become more intimately acquainted with her; when, finding her sitting with her two aunts, Harcourt and Gordon, and Lady Seaton, he joined their party, and stood talking with Blanche, until the sets were again beginning to form.

"Really, Miss Douglas, this is the most delightful ball," Lord Danby observed, "I have ever attended; everything is so well arranged; and the great variety of beautiful and elegant costumes selected by the ladies renders it quite a fairy scene. The music also is so enlivening, one feels it almost impossible to resist its influence. Are you not, also, very fond of dancing, Miss Douglas?"

"Oh, yes!" she replied. "I enjoy a ball exceedingly."

"Then, as I perceive you have no partner, will you consider me too presuming in petitioning for the honour of another dance?"

"I must beg to decline, Lord Danby, being already engaged."

"Really," he continued, "I think your partner, whoever he may be, deserves severe punishment for his negligence or indifference, in preferring his friends' society in the supper-room to yours."

"He may, perhaps, be detained there against his inclination," she replied; "or, probably, is not aware that dancing has re-commenced."

"You are very considerate and forbearing, Miss Douglas, where, perhaps, your clemency may fail to be appreciated; although I can scarcely believe it possible any gentleman could for a moment forget an engagement with yourself."

"Then, of course," she added, "my partner being unavoidably absent, I cannot think of punishing him unjustly by accepting another in his place."

"But if you will accept my arm conditionally," pleaded Danby, "until he makes his appearance, I promise to resign your hand the moment he approaches."

Blanche still quietly declined, when Mrs. Harcourt overhearing her, interposed; "Surely, my dear, you will not refuse Lord Danby on such fair conditions; it is your partner's duty to be in attendance, if he wished to dance with you; and you are not to sit still to suit his convenience."

"I have danced twice with Lord Danby already this evening, Aunt Harcourt, and having experienced some unpleasantness in accepting one partner when engaged to another, I prefer sitting down to causing any further disagreement."

"Oh, that is the gentlemen's affair, my dear; you have nothing to do with their differences."

"Indeed, but I think she has, Mrs. Harcourt," observed Aunt Gordon, "and Blanche is acting most wisely in declining to give offence to any one;" and putting her niece's arm within her own, she walked off to another part of the room.

"You have done quite right, my dearest girl," said Aunt Gordon, "in refusing Lord Danby; and I hope you will never follow Mrs. Harcourt's advice, who does not care what scrapes she may lead you into, or what annoyance you may suffer, when a lord is in the case; vain, foolish woman! one would think she had caused mischief enough already by trying to force Lord Vancourt upon you; but here comes William. Well, sir," she said, "are you not ashamed of yourself, to be sitting drinking with your boon companions so long, when you knew you were engaged to Blanche?"

"Indeed, dear aunt, I was not aware that such was the case, or nothing should have prevented me leaving the room earlier; although, as it is, I have given great offence by resigning my presidential chair so soon."

"Well, William, I was only joking, but, as this quadrille is now half finished, sit down with me and Blanche in this snug corner, and tell us what that shouting was about."

Beauchamp gladly complied; and his fair listeners laughed exceedingly at his description of the Master of the C—— Hunt's attempts to return thanks.

When Beauchamp stood up with Blanche some short time afterwards, Lord Danby remarked to Mrs. Harcourt, "Oh, I see now who the gentleman is to whom Miss Douglas was so unwilling to give offence; and I am told Mr. Beauchamp is decidedly in great favour, if not already engaged to her; yet, considering what has occurred, this is almost a natural consequence."

"You are greatly misinformed, Lord Danby. Mr. Beauchamp cannot be engaged to my niece without her guardian's consent, which, I am quite sure, he will never obtain from Mr. Harcourt; nor has it ever been solicited. He and Miss Douglas have been known to each other from childhood, which makes them, of course, on very intimate terms; and Lord Malcolm, her cousin, is also, I believe, engaged to Mr. Beauchamp's sister."

"Oh, perhaps, then," said Lord Danby, "this may account for that cordiality which is observable in their manner to each other."

"Most certainly," replied Mrs. Harcourt; "Mr. Beauchamp cannot reasonably entertain any other views towards my niece, knowing the utter impossibility of his ever standing in a nearer relation to her than he does at present."

Lord Danby, thus assured by Mrs. Harcourt, and knowing no cause to doubt her authority or sincerity in speaking so unreservedly on the subject, treated Blanche's rumoured engagement to Beauchamp as mere gossip, without any good foundation; and accordingly resolved to prosecute his suit if, on nearer acquaintance, she realised his expectations.

Beauchamp, although not doubting Blanche's resolution to adhere to her intention of not accepting any other partner than himself for the remainder of the evening, thought it more prudent to compromise the matter by engaging her for the last dance only.

"It would be very improper in me, dear girl," he observed, "to expose you to the remarks which would assuredly follow, and excite Mrs. Harcourt's suspicions of our attachment, which, for the present, it is more prudent to conceal; but, believe me, I do not for a moment doubt your constancy, or love for me as a brother," he added in a lower tone, which she did not appear to have heard.

"What can I say, then, William, to Lord Danby, should he ask me again? Mrs. Harcourt will take offence, I suppose, if I refuse him."

"You are not to consult Mrs. Harcourt's, but your own feelings, Blanche, in such cases; and knowing the general opinion on this point, you, of course, are the best judge, whether you feel inclined to give further encouragement to Lord Danby by such a very particular mark of favour, as accepting him three times for your partner, on the first night of your acquaintance. Lord Danby and lookers-on will of course draw the natural conclusion that you approve those marked attentions; but if you do not intend to give him encouragement, you can plead fatigue, or other engagements." Beauchamp, having thus expressed himself, consigned Blanche to Mrs. Gordon's care, who was soon relieved of her charge by a succession of applicants for the honour of her niece's hand, which was not permitted to remain idle until the dawn of morning put an end to further exertions.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE next day, a grand muster of fox-hunters took place about four miles from Cherrington, where the young squire made his appearance about twelve o'clock; and his usual good fortune having attended him, resulting in a good day's sport, all retired from the field well satisfied. The third morning, Beauchamp rode over to the Priory, and remained until after luncheon; when, sitting with Blanche in the drawing-room, to his surprise Captain Markham was announced, accompanied by Lord Danby.

"Ah, Beauchamp, old fellow, good day's sport, yesterday—'pon honour. Danby thinks first-rate. Called to inquire how the ladies were after the ball. Capital band, Miss Douglas; lots of partners; grand affair—don't you think so?"

"Yes, Captain Markham; everything was exceedingly well arranged, and reflects great credit on fox-hunters."

Lord Danby, although received rather formally by Beauchamp, was very courteous in his address to Blanche; hoping she did not feel over-fatigued by her great exertions, with many other little speeches of this nature, usual on such occasions; soon after which the visitors took their leave.

"Beauchamp again!" remarked Lord Danby to his friend, during their ride home; "there must be something more in his constant attentions to Miss Douglas than Mrs. Harcourt imagines."

"Can't say, Danby, 'pon honour—don't concern me—mind my own business—every fellow must take care of himself; but Harcourt is a crusty old customer—very, won't give in—swears Beauchamp sha'n't have her—can't be had without his consent—ward, and all that sort of thing."

"Well, I hardly know what to think, Markham."

"Take my advice, Danby—think nothing about it, but act as you feel inclined—field open to all—no poaching—win her, if you can—worth having—lots of tin—capital chance—Marchioness of Danby—sure to take."

"I do not regard her fortune, Markham, and believe she would not marry me for my title, unless my first impressions of her character are very erroneous. But it is quite premature my talking in this manner upon so short an acquaintance."

A few nights after, Mrs. Gordon, Lord Malcolm, and Blanche, with the Beauchamp family, dined at Barton Court, and after dinner Lord Danby paid particular attention to Miss Douglas, sitting near her the greater part of the evening, evidently fascinated by her unaffected manners and exceeding loveliness; in fact, from that time he fell really in love with her. Beauchamp, guessing what was passing in Lord Danby's mind, kept at a distance, from that feeling of hauteur which jealousy engenders; and Mrs. Gordon witnessed with alarm his contracting brows and compressed lips. Selina Markham, also, noticing his grave deportment and thoughtful looks, whispered—

"What is the matter with you to-night, Will Beauchamp? You look like a judge with his black cap on, about to pronounce sentence of death on some unhappy culprit. I read your thoughts—the culprit is Danby—another lord to shoot, eh, Will?"

"Nonsense, Selina."

"Sense, Will Beauchamp; I have been watching your savage looks at the little flirtation going on in that quiet corner between Blanche and Danby; but don't be alarmed—he is not the fellow to run away with her, or attempt it—all right and above board this time. But seriously speaking, Beauchamp, if you are, as I believe, truly in love with Blanche, make me your confidant, and I will soon check my lord from further advances."

"Thank you, Selina, for your friendly intentions, but Blanche is free to choose whom she pleases."

"Is it so, William? Are you not already engaged?" There was no reply. "I had hoped," added Selina, "that you were; but take my advice, don't be a spooney, but propose at once."

"And be at once rejected by Harcourt. No, no, Selina, I have too much pride for that; but say no more now, or we shall be overheard."

From that night Lord Danby became a frequent visitor at the Priory, where his very quiet, gentlemanly manners and amiable disposition soon won upon all the family; so much so, that even Mrs. Gordon felt very much pleased with his company, although never failing in her loyalty to Beauchamp, of whom she now saw so little as to excite great misgivings in her mind. Lord Danby was at first generally accompanied by Markham or his sister, but now often rode over there alone, and sometimes on hunting days, which at last excited Mrs. Gordon's suspicions that he entertained serious intentions towards her niece.

"Blanche," she said, one day, after finding on her return to the house that he had been sitting with her some time in the drawing-room while she was occupied in the garden, "Lord Danby has paid a long visit. I hear he has been here more than an hour, and I begin to think with Charles, his attentions to you, my dear girl, can admit of only one interpretation. But seriously, Blanche, what do you think of him?"

"He is very agreeable, dear aunt, pleasing, and good-humoured, and I like him very much; Charles also appears to be on very friendly terms with him, and speaks highly in his praise."

"Yes, my dear, he is certainly, as far as I can judge from our short acquaintance, a very unaffected, excellent young man; but it is quite clear now that his visits here are unquestionably on your account, and William, from his unusual absence, has evidently heard and believes the same. Are you prepared, therefore, my dear girl (as I will never influence you in the choice of a husband), to receive him as a suitor for your hand, to the exclusion of Beauchamp, whom, after due reflection, you may only love as a brother? If so, dear Blanche, knowing William's deep, disinterested regard for you, pray be candid with me, as your true welfare is my first consideration; so do not hesitate in telling me if you prefer Lord Danby, that I may break to William that his hopes are at an end."

"Oh, no, my dearest aunt," exclaimed Blanche, throwing her arms round her neck; "I never did, never can love any other than dear William; but he has been so distant lately that I almost fear he has ceased to love me."

"Then had he ceased to love you, dear girl, would you accept Lord Danby?"

"No, dear aunt, that is impossible; I could not love again so soon, if ever."

"My own dear child, then rest assured you are as secure of William's affection as of my own, which neither time nor absence can ever change; but you know his keen, sensitive feelings, and often-expressed resolution never to stand in your way, if he thought you preferred another more eligible than himself. Poor fellow! I know what he must have suffered lately, since we dined at Barton Court, and I noticed his deep, thoughtful looks fixed on you and Lord Danby when sitting together. But now, dear Blanche, he will soon return, when he knows your feelings are unchanged."

After this conversation, Mrs. Gordon sought Malcolm, and, telling him of her explanation with Blanche, begged him to ride directly to Bampton, and entreat William Beauchamp to come over to the Priory the next day. Malcolm lost no time in finding his friend; and having at last satisfied his scruples and allayed his suspicions, which were hard to overcome, he obtained his promise to comply with Mrs. Gordon's request. This same afternoon, Lord Danby, after his very agreeable *tête-à-tête* with Blanche, and construing her pleased and sometimes embarrassed looks into a warmer sentiment, coupling with these also his kind reception at the Priory and Beauchamp's apparent indifference, all combined impressing him with the idea that he could not now sue in vain, he rode directly to Throseby, and finding Mr. Harcourt at home, proposed for his ward, and was, of course without much hesitation, accepted. After expressing his grateful thanks to Mr. Harcourt, Lord Danby begged permission to plead his own cause in person to Miss Douglas, before his formal proposal should be made known.

"Certainly, my lord," replied Mr. Harcourt; "if you particularly wish it, I can have no positive objection to such a request, provided you are quite sure of the duke's approbation."

"I have already consulted him on the subject, Mr. Harcourt, and there is his reply," handing him a letter from his father.

"This is perfectly satisfactory, my lord," replied Mr. Harcourt, "and you have our best wishes for your success."

The next morning, about eleven o'clock, Lord Danby directed his course to the Priory. Blanche was sitting by herself in the drawing-room (her aunt having, as usual after breakfast, gone to her poultry-yard), when the door opened, and he was announced. She would gladly have made any excuse to leave the room, but that being impossible without great apparent rudeness, she sat down with a tremor and embarrassment so very visible and unlike her usual manner, that it could not escape the notice of Lord Danby, who felt his hopes rise at what he very naturally concluded evinced a warmer feeling towards him than that of a mere acquaintance; and thus encouraged, he took advantage of the present opportunity to press his suit and avow the feelings of love and affection, which ever since his first introduction to her had been daily increasing.

After a few common-place remarks, his lordship observed that his visit to Barton Court was drawing to a close. "A visit, Miss Douglas, which has been productive of more pleasure to me than I can express, but from which the happiness or misery of my future life will be dated; need I say that on you that happiness depends? Wealth and rank I offer you (though I feel these would have little weight), but what is far beyond these, a heart deeply and devotedly your own, and which has never been given to another. Say, dearest Miss Douglas," taking her hand, "if I may hope to be fortunate enough to possess this treasure?"

Poor Blanche was quite overwhelmed with pain and confusion at this unequivocal proposal, but, quickly recovering herself, she withdrew her hand, saying, "Indeed, Lord Danby, I very much regret this avowal of your sentiments towards me."

"Oh, recall that word—regret, Miss Douglas; for though our acquaintance has been short, let me still hope that in time my devoted affection may induce you to give me a more favourable answer than that I now dread."

"Pray cease, my lord; indeed, you distress me; I never imagined your attentions were more than those of a friend."

"Every one must have divined the nature of those attentions but yourself; and now, dear Miss Douglas, listen, I entreat, to one who has never known what love was till he knew you, and whose whole happiness rests on your reply. Give me ever so distant a hope that I may win that hand I would give all I possess to obtain."

"Indeed, Lord Danby, I cannot be ever more to you than a friend, flattered as I feel by your preference for me. But it is impossible; my feelings will not change."

"Then," cried he, turning very pale, "my worst forebodings are verified; you love another?"

Blanche blushed crimson, and rising, said, "I know not by what right Lord Danby presumes to question my feelings."

"Oh, forgive me, Miss Douglas. I never meant to offend but have some pity on this bitter disappointment to all my long-cherished hopes, and at least do not discard me as a friend, though you will not now listen to me as a lover. I can never, while life lasts, cease to be deeply interested in one to whom I would have devoted that life, if permitted."

But Blanche, hearing footsteps in the hall, fled hastily through another door, and sought her own room.

It is always a painful thing for a woman to refuse any man, but doubly so when that man has qualities to command esteem and admiration; and Blanche now devoutly wished Lord Danby had never been known to her, or that she had been spared the necessity of inflicting pain on one so truly estimable. Little did she think, at that very moment, how agonising were the feelings of that dear one for whom she had rejected him; but we must now relate what caused Beauchamp to feel thus.

It so happened that he arrived at the Priory about ten minutes after Lord Danby, and giving his horse to a servant in the stable-yard, walked round to the hall door. In doing so, he passed the drawing-room window, and a glance into the room revealed to his astonished sight Lord Danby sitting on the sofa with Blanche, and holding her hand in his. Beauchamp's brain was almost on fire at the sight; he rushed back into the stable-yard, seized his horse from the astonished groom, who was taking him into the stable, and with a look of fury in his eyes rode rapidly away. At the lodge-gates he met Malcolm, who exclaimed, "Why, Beauchamp, what on earth is the matter? you look scared and pale as death. My dear fellow, what has happened?"

"You have deceived me, Lord Malcolm, and brought me here to be insulted—scorned—disgraced. Not five minutes since have I seen Blanche Douglas sitting on the sofa, with Lord Danby's hand in hers. Let me pass," as Malcolm attempted to detain him; "fool! idiot though I have been, that sight has crazed—has maddened me!"

' 'For Heaven's sake ,stop one moment, Beauchamp; on my honour, I have not deceived you," exclaimed Malcolm. But he was gone, riding furiously towards home.

Malcolm returned instantly to the house, and sought Blanche in the drawing-room; she was not there. He then ran up-stairs, calling her name loudly. In a moment she appeared from her room.

"What do you want, Charles?" she asked.

"Quick, Blanche, one word only; have you accepted Lord Danby?"

"Oh, Charles, how can you ask me such a question?"

"On your life—your honour—answer me truly—without evasion—have you positively, unconditionally refused him?"

"On my honour, Charles, yes; but what makes you ask me so vehemently?"

"Because Beauchamp has been here, saw you sitting with your hand in his, and the sight has driven him distracted; but I must be gone this moment and follow him, or I know not what he may do in his excited state."

Malcolm rushed from the house, and mounting his horse, which his servant held at the door, galloped instantly away to overtake his friend. Mrs. Gordon, who was returning from her poultry-yard, alarmed at the furious galloping of horses up the carriage drive, entered the house hastily, and inquired of the footman what it meant, and who had been calling there.

"The Marquis of Danby, ma'am, has been here and is just gone. Mr. William Beauchamp rode into the yard, and left his horse, but before it could be put into the stable, he returned and took him from John's hand, and rode off as fast as he could go. My lord has also ridden full gallop up to the lodge."

"What can have happened, Thomas?" asked Mrs. Gordon, anxiously.

"Nothing that I know of, ma'am; but John said Master William was in a terrible way about something, and looked like a ghost."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Gordon; "but where is Miss Douglas?"

"In her own room, I believe, ma'am;" and immediately Mrs. Gordon rushed up-stairs, and found Blanche in an agony of grief.

"My own child" (throwing her arms round her niece), "what on earth has happened? what is the meaning of all I heard about Lord Danby, Beauchamp, and Malcolm riding so furiously away, and you in tears too? Dear Blanche, pray tell me what has caused this dreadful commotion?"

"Dear, dear aunt," replied Blanche, crying bitterly, "I am the unfortunate cause of all."

Blanche then related what had occurred between herself and Lord Danby, and that Beauchamp having, on passing the window, seen him take her hand, rode away, as her cousin told her, in a distracted state, refusing to stop or listen to him a moment; and that Charles, learning the truth from her own lips, immediately followed him, fearing he might commit some rash act.

"May Heaven avert such a calamity, my dear child!" exclaimed Mrs. Gordon; "but pray do not give way thus; we can trust Charles, and, oh! how fortunate he was here."

"Indeed, dear aunt, I should never forgive myself were anything to befall poor William, for I fear I may have treated Lord Danby in too friendly a manner, as we all liked him so much; but, until yesterday, I never thought he intended more than common attention to me, and indeed, dear aunt, this morning he was so suddenly announced that I could not escape from the room, though, after what you told me yesterday, I had resolved never to be left alone with him again."

"My dear love, do not distress yourself so, it could not be avoided, and I hope Charles will prevail on William to return."

Fast as Lord Malcolm rode, and he slackened not his speed for a moment, Beauchamp far outstripped him, and having put his horse in the stable, ordered a fresh one to be saddled immediately, going up the back stairs to his room, where, having packed up a carpet bag, he sat writing a few hasty lines to his father, explaining what had taken place, and his intention of leaving home for a short time; when Malcolm, bursting open the door, exclaimed, "Beauchamp, why this folly, this madness? Danby has proposed, and is rejected!—how could you think Blanche would act otherwise!"

"On your honour, Malcolm, is this true?"

"On my life, it is; Blanche has told me all; that, urging his suit, he seized her hand for a moment, but that she immediately withdrew it, and positively refused his addresses."

Beauchamp stood as if electrified, his lips and frame quivering with agitation, and then sunk back into a chair, overpowered by conflicting sensations.

"Here, Beauchamp," said Malcolm, pouring out a glass of water, "drink this, my dear fellow; all is well, believe me, and now you must return to poor dear Blanche, who is almost broken-hearted, fearing you have left her for ever."

"Oh, Malcolm! the agony of that moment; I thought my heart would burst, and now see how my hand trembles; I am quite bewildered still."

"Then come with me, my dear Beauchamp; a glass of wine first, and then our horses."

"I cannot go just yet, Malcolm; my head throbs so."

"The air will revive you, Beauchamp, so come along directly;" and taking his friend's arm, Malcolm led him downstairs, and having forced him to drink a glass of wine, they mounted their horses. Beauchamp rode by his friend's side, and was like a man in a trance, from which Malcolm could not rouse him; but when they reached the Priory, seeing Blanche at the little morning-room window, with her handkerchief in her hand, Malcolm exclaimed, "There is that dear girl still crying; can you doubt her now?"

In an instant Beauchamp rushed into the room, and folding her in his arms, burst into tears. "Thank Heaven for those tears," said Malcolm; "now, dear Blanche, they will relieve him."

Leaving the lovers together, Malcolm took his aunt into the drawing-room, and told her the state in which he found Beauchamp. "In short, dear aunt, he has received a dreadful shock, and I feared at first his brain was seriously affected. We must do all now to soothe and comfort him." The interview between Blanche and Beauchamp was most affecting; but she, seeing his prostrate state of mind, was the first to rouse herself, and rally him on his want of faith in her attachment.

"My own dearest treasure," replied Beauchamp, "I deserve every reproach you can heap upon my head; but if you knew only half what I have suffered since the ball and dinner party at Sir Lionel's, and hearing the frequent remarks made by others, you would indeed pity, rather than condemn me, for believing you had mistaken the true nature of your feelings towards me; but forgive all my jealous, unjust suspicions—I will never again listen to such false reports."

Aunt Gordon, thinking too much excitement might be injurious, now made her appearance, saying in a cheerful voice, "Well, Blanche, I hope you have given William a thorough good scolding; but the luncheon is on the table, and after that you must really take a walk this fine day, having been sitting in the house all the morning."

Beauchamp was unable to eat anything, which Mrs. Gordon remarking, poured him out a glass of wine. "Why, my dear boy, you look quite wretched, with that pale, wan face; pray take something, if only a biscuit; and mind, my love, you have a good long walk afterwards, to give him an appetite for his dinner."

"I fear, dear aunt, I cannot dine with you to-day."

"I fear, dear William, you must," was the playful reply;

"and as you are so dainty, I shall order a couple of my spring chickens to be dressed especially for you."

"Then I must send to let my father and Constance know I do not dine at home."

"Oh, yes, of course," replied Malcolm, "and I shall go over and dine at Bampton in your place, my boy, and make love to Constance all the evening, as you were in such a state this morning I could not speak a word to her."

After luncheon, Malcolm again mounted his horse, to allay the old squire's apprehensions about his son, not doubting the servants had noticed his very excited manner; and Beauchamp with Blanche strolled out together for a walk, and did not return until nearly five o'clock; so agreeably passed the time, that they were scarcely aware of the lateness of the hour. It would be difficult to point out the happiest of those three persons, who after dinner drew round to the fireside at the Priory that evening. Mrs. Gordon being in high spirits, could not forbear joking Beauchamp on his jealousy.

"Why, William, at this rate you will be in a lunatic asylum within a week of Blanche's first appearance at Almack's; you really must school yourself to meet these things with complacency, if not with indifference; for Blanche will undoubtedly attract many admirers (irrespective of her fortune), and she cannot prevent people falling in love with her, or proposing."

"Indeed, dear aunt, I feel more and more every day how undeserving I am of her preference, and that feeling makes me wretched; she is so far, so very far beyond my deserts, that I know I have no right to aspire to that dear hand, which I dread sometimes to think can never be mine."

"Never, dear William, believe me," replied Blanche, "shall this hand (placing it in his) belong to any other than yourself; titles, rank, honours are nothing to me, in comparison with your love. Oh! William, don't again doubt my entire devotion to yourself, or you will, indeed, make me miserable."

"Heaven bless you, my own darling girl, for that avowal," as he raised her hand to his lips, and the tears started to his eyes from uncontrollable emotion.

"Come, come, my dear boy," said Mrs. Gordon, "your nerves are sadly shattered by this morning's work; pray do not torment yourself any more in this foolish manner."

"I *will not* go to London, aunt," added Blanche, "unless William goes too; and to save him any anxiety, I had rather not go at all."

"Well, dear child, no one can oblige you to go, unless you like it; so we will say no more on the subject. And now, William, I hope you will not be sparing of your visits to the Priory for the future; and to make up for your bad conduct, I expect you will come over here at least two or three days in the week, if not oftener."

"You will, I fear, dear aunt, be sooner tired of my company than I shall be of yours; as I have promised this dear girl to be here as often as possible."

"I am delighted to hear it, William; so now take another glass of wine, and we will then go to the ladies' drawing-room, and Blanche will sing a few songs to enliven us."

It was a late hour before Beauchamp could tear himself away from her he loved so enthusiastically; when, after folding her once more in a long and fervent embrace, invoking every blessing on her head, and then pressing Aunt Gordon's hand to his lips, he bade them both good night.

"Dear, kind, affectionate boy!" exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, when he left the room, "who could fail to love you, even though ten times more jealous than you are?"

"Oh, dear aunt, you do not, cannot know how dearly I do love him."

"Indeed, my darling girl, I do believe it, and Heaven grant you may ever love him as now, or, poor fellow, I believe he would never survive a change."

"Never, dearest aunt, shall he find any change in me."

"I do not fear it, my love; so now let us go to our rooms, and thank the Almighty that the day which began in trouble has ended in happiness to us all."

CHAPTER XXIV.

We must now turn to Lord Danby, who felt most acutely the sudden overthrow of his fondly-cherished and too sanguine hopes, and whose disappointment was in proportion to his highly-wrought expectations. Many women, more beautiful, more highly accomplished, more fascinating in manner, of high rank and of great wealth, had Lord Danby encountered in his short intercourse with the world, who had excited his passing admiration, without awakening any deeper emotion; but until the night of the hunt ball, he had never met with one who realised his ideas of perfect loveliness. The unstudied elegance of mien and manner—the soft, angelic countenance of Blanche Douglas, lit up by those sparkling eyes, so innocently expressive of her artless, unsophisticated mind, presented to Lord Danby's imagination, if not absolutely to his sight, that vision he had so long cherished in his heart, of perfection in woman. Whenever she moved, his eyes instinctively, irresistibly followed; and after having danced two quadrilles with her, he was as much taken with her guileless remarks, gentle disposition, light, buoyant spirits and cheerful conversation, from which there was a total absence of either levity or satire, as he had been at first sight with her person; and from that night her image was the constant companion of his thoughts, and ever present day and night. Even in rejecting his proposals that day, she was lovely still; so grieved to inflict pain, so anxious to spare those bitter feelings she seemed by intuition to know he must feel, when obliged to crush by one word all his deeply-indulged, fondly-cherished hopes of happiness. "Oh, Blanche, Blanche!" ejaculated Lord Danby, as he spurred forward from the lodge gates, which so short a time before he had entered cheerful and happy; "all I possess in the world—rank, honours, and riches—would I resign; all, all—everything, for that most precious to me of all earthly treasures—your dear hand. But it cannot be —not now, at least—if ever! She loves, I fear, another—and that man is William Beauchamp. It must be so, and Harcourt has deceived me." Indulging in such melancholy reflections, Lord Danby reached Barton Court, and immediately repaired to his own room, where, when feeling more composed, he sat down and wrote a few lines to Mr. Harcourt, expressive of his feelings of unfeigned sorrow and most poignant grief in having that morning failed to interest Miss Douglas in his favour; although acknowledging her kind consideration in endeavouring to spare him as much as possible the pain of a refusal.

Having dispatched this letter by his servant to Throseby, Lord Danby sought Sir Lionel, and made known his intention of leaving Barton Court the following morning, alleging, as his excuse for curtailing his visit, that an unexpected event required his immediate return home. Lord Danby's communication excited no little surprise and no trifling indignation on the part of Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt, who, attributing Blanche's refusal of such an unexceptionable offer to Mrs. Gordon's influence over her in favour of Beauchamp, drove over in hot haste to the Priory, vowing vengeance, and resolving to insist on Blanche being restored to their protection.

Mrs. Gordon was sitting alone at her work in the drawing-room (Malcolm and Blanche having ridden over to Bampton), when Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt pounced in upon her, and with scarcely the usual civility of shaking hands, the gentleman rushed *in medias res*, or in plainer terms, was *at her* without circumlocution, boiling to deliver himself of his angry thoughts.

"So, Mrs. Gordon, I find you have persuaded your niece to reject the Marquis of Danby ; a young nobleman of unblemished character, large fortune, and heir to a dukedom ! What fault could you find with him, Mrs. Gordon ? He is handsome, most amiable in disposition (Sir Lionel and all his family speak in raptures of his lordship), and agreeable ; in short, perfectly unexceptionable in every respect. But I suppose it did not suit *your views* that my ward should accept his lordship ; and therefore her prospects in life are to be sacrificed that you may carry out your own plans."

"My plans ! Mr. Harcourt," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, unable to contain her indignation any longer, "how dare *you* accuse *me* of planning ! You and your friend, Lord Mervyn, are planners, and very creditable plans you devise between you ! I persuade my niece to reject Lord Danby ! I scorn the imputation, sir, and throw it back, as a base, untrue, unmanly assertion. My influence never has been, and never shall be exercised like yours, in inducing her to marry *any* man ; neither have I been instrumental in her refusal of Lord Danby ; and I say, without fear of contradiction, in which I shall be fully confirmed by his lordship, that he has received from me every facility for improving his acquaintance with my niece since he has been in this neighbourhood. From the day we dined at Sir Lionel Markham's, Lord Danby has had the *entrée* of my house at all times ; Lord Malcolm and myself have treated him with the greatest kindness, from his being previously known to Charles ; he has dined here very frequently ; has often seen Blanche alone, when I have been out or otherwise engaged ; in short, we all liked him so much and thought so highly of him, that latterly his visits were made without the least formality, and he was received on the footing of a friend. These are plain facts, Mr. Harcourt ; and had I any intention, or any reason whatever, to prejudice Blanche against Lord Danby, or throw any obstacle in his way, it is quite needless for me to say, orders might have been given to my servants to refuse him admittance ;

and last of all, when he called yesterday, and proposed to Blanche, I was quite unaware of his having been here, until some time after he had left the house."

"It appears most extraordinary to me," replied Mrs. Harcourt, "quite inexplicable, how Blanche could refuse such a person as Lord Danby."

"And so you thought before, Mrs. Harcourt, when she refused Lord Vancourt; preferring to be guided by her own feelings instead of listening to your advice; and fortunate indeed, poor girl! for her, that she summoned resolution enough to think and act for herself. In this instance she has done the same thing, and feeling no deeper regard for Lord Danby upon so short an acquaintance, she of course declined his proposal. There is nothing very extraordinary in such conduct, unless you can show that my niece is under the imperious necessity of accepting any nobleman who proposes, whether she likes him or not."

"I should like to know," retorted Mrs. Harcourt, "how often your favourite, Mr. Beauchamp, has been here lately?"

"Without keeping an exact register of all persons who call at the Priory," replied Mrs. Gordon, "I think I may safely say that since the ball he has called twice, and dined here once only; therefore his presence cannot have operated as a counterfoil to Lord Danby, who has had the field quite open to the prosecution of his addresses, without the slightest intervention from any other person whatever; and I may add that, guessing his lordship's intentions from his very frequent visits, I pointed out to Blanche the advantages of such an alliance, and his many good qualities, leaving it entirely to her own feelings to accept him or not."

"Oh, indeed, Mrs. Gordon; but pray, where is Blanche? as we wish very much to see her."

"She is out riding with her cousin," was the reply.

The Harcourts rose soon after and took their leave, seeing no grounds for further altercation with Mrs. Gordon, who had so completely turned the tables on them.

As the time fixed for holding the assizes drew near, Blanche became exceedingly nervous, requiring all Beauchamp's tenderness and encouragement to strengthen her for the coming trial; and every hour he could spare was devoted to her.

"Oh, William!" she exclaimed one day, when they were walking arm-in-arm in the garden; "I have such a dread of appearing in court, that I wish Charles would give up all further proceedings, and let the matter rest as it is. Will you ask him to do so, as he will not listen to me?"

"My dearest girl, you know I would do anything to spare your feelings; but you must consider, if the trial is prevented taking place, your fair name will be tarnished for ever, and people will say you consented to elope with Lord Vancourt; this will be undoubtedly the opinion of the world, and the reflections cast upon your character for such an act will follow you through life. Would you consent to lie under such an imputation, merely to avoid a little unpleasantry for a few minutes? as you have little more to depose to than your honour, and surprise at Lord Vancourt's attempt to hurry you off."

"If not for my own sake, yet for yours, dear William, must I summon then all my courage, as no reflections shall ever be cast on your wife, which I now consider myself to be, in the sight of Heaven, having vowed never to marry another, if it pleases the Almighty to spare our lives until that event takes place."

"My own dearest Blanche, on my account you shall never be subjected to one moment's inquietude, which it may be in my power to prevent. The world is nothing to me. I care neither for its favours nor its frowns; it is for yourself only I am thinking, should any unfortunate circumstance prevent our union; for without Mrs. Harcourt's consent, I cannot claim your hand until two long years have elapsed; and how many things may happen in that time to dash the cup of happiness from my lips!"

"Nothing, William, but the hand of death can ever prevent me fulfilling my engagement to you, although I fear you will never believe me sincere in this oft-expressed determination. Oh, would that you could read every secret feeling of my heart, which beats for you only! Indeed, indeed, dear William, your doubts and suspicions make me very miserable; for three long weeks, day after day, hour after hour, I sat wondering why you never came, watching and hoping that the sound of every horse I heard approaching might be yours. Oh, had you come as usual, I had been spared that unpleasant scene with Lord Danby, and you the agony of believing for one moment that I could prefer him or any other human being to yourself."

"Dear, dear Blanche, pray spare me those bitter reflections which my past conduct calls up; but, indeed, I could not help thinking, from what occurred at the ball, and afterwards at Barton Court, when you were sitting so long with Lord Danby, and so evidently pleased with his society, that his attentions must be most agreeable to you; and it was on that account solely, and lest my presence might influence you, or deter him from an expression of his sentiments, that I absented myself so long from the Priory."

"Well, dear William, you do not now, I hope, believe that I ever intended anything more than common civility to Lord Danby; but to convince you of my unswerving attachment to yourself, here is a little present which I had purchased expressly for your own hand, within this last week"—producing a beautiful diamond ring, with a small lock of her hair inside—"and which you must wear as a symbol of my love. Come, give me your hand—I shall place it myself on your finger, and when I cease to be your own dear Blanche, as you so often call me, then return this ring to me again."

"That you will never cease to be to me, my own sweet girl," pressing her to his heart; "and now, dear Blanche, see that I also had prepared a similar present for yourself, which I had intended giving you after the hunt ball; and now I must examine which finger it will fit best."

"Place it where you would my wedding-ring, dear William; and now, with my hand in yours, by that token I pledge my faith to you. Dear William, will that pledged promise satisfy your jealous, unjust suspicions? and will you from this hour promise never to doubt more your own dear Blanche?"

"Yes, dear girl, that promise I give most cheerfully, and trust to observe most faithfully; but, believe me, without any desire to extenuate my own conduct, true, devoted affection cannot exist without some jealousy; and now tell me, were I to pay great attention to any pretty girl by dancing with her two or three times on the same night, and sitting with her apart from the other company, when meeting at dinner or other parties,—were I also, in addition to these little acts of attention, to be frequently calling at her father's house, and monopolising her society as much as I conveniently could,—would you not, dear girl, experience some little uneasy sensations at my conduct, and begin with good cause to doubt the sincerity of my professed undivided regard for yourself?"

"Unquestionably I should, William; but with a full knowledge of your meaning, and seeing how you intend to apply it, the case between us is not exactly parallel. Gentlemen have the option of paying any such attentions, which ladies have not the option of declining sometimes, without apparent rudeness, and where no necessity exists for showing it, particularly to those whose behaviour is courteous and their society agreeable; but surely, my dear William, there is a wide distinction between being pleased with a person and being in love with him; and it would be great vanity in a girl to suppose that every man, who tries to make himself agreeable, must necessarily be in love with her."

"Not so very wide a distinction, dear girl, as the one often leads to the other, and men certainly consider these smiling receptions of their attentions as an encouragement to proceed further."

"Then you gentlemen, William, are very vain, unreasonable animals; for girls, if distant or reserved in their manners, are accused of hauteur, stupidity, or ill temper; and if socially disposed, of flirting, or leading you to imagine they are more seriously affected."

"Well, dear Blanche, it is, I conclude, rather a difficult matter for young ladies to draw the line of distinction; but you have seen two instances of men's vanity and unreasonableness in the conduct of Vernon and Lord Danby, who both aspired to your hand without your having given them, as you believe, any just or reasonable grounds for thinking that you accepted their devoirs in any other light than mere politeness; so you must perceive, my dear girl, that my opinion of men's feelings in such cases is tolerably correct; and I would only suggest, to spare yourself the unpleasantness of similar scenes in future, a more guarded and reserved manner towards any man who shows you any unusual attentions, unless you really mean to encourage his addresses."

"Then, Mr. Will, I suppose I must appear as demure as a Quakeress in society; neither smile, nor look pleased, scarcely speak, and consent to be set down as a most stupid, dull girl, without two ideas in my head, and treat all men alike, whether agreeable or the reverse, merely to avoid the possibility of their falling in love with me. Really, if men are such foolish, sensitive creatures, they must take care of themselves; but I rather suspect the majority are not very scrupulous in trying to win the affections of unsuspecting girls, without intending anything more."

"It is quite true, dear girl, that men of the world care no more about breaking girls' hearts than they do about breaking their fans, and such deserve no mercy; but I am perfectly satisfied my dear Blanche will never encourage flirtations with men of this description."

"So you really can repose some little confidence in me after all your lecturing, Mr. William?"

"Yes, Blanche, I do, indeed, believe you incapable of wilfully misleading any one; and as you know the happiness or misery of my future life now rests in your keeping, you will not, I am convinced, think lightly of that trust which from this hour is so implicitly confided in you; and if I am a little jealous sometimes, set it down to the right account—my sole, undivided love and anxious solicitude about one who is, and ever must be, far dearer to me than my own life. And now, dear girl, let us return to Aunt Gordon, who, I dare say, begins to think we have been a most unreasonable time love-making this morning."

"Well, children," remarked that lady, "your delightful little topic appears quite inexhaustible."

"My dear aunt," replied Blanche, laughing, "you are greatly deceived in thinking William has been talking love to me all this time, whereas he has been giving me a most severe lecture on flirtation; in fact, dear aunt, his speeches are often the reverse of romantic, pathetic, or even complimentary."

"So much the better, my love; it is the greatest proof that he has formed a high and true estimate of your own good sense. The silly trash talked by most lovers is perfectly sickening, and I never thought William would pour into your ears such fulsome, unmeaning stuff, which even a child of twelve years old might feel ashamed of listening to."

"There is no fear of that, dear aunt; only just give him a hint not to lecture me quite so much for the future."

"Return the compliment, my love, as he requires some sharp admonitions on his weak point—jealousy. And now, I want you both to assist me in the conservatory."

CHAPTER XXV.

On the morning of the trial, the court was crowded to excess by well-dressed persons of both sexes, attracted by the novelty of the case and the strong feeling excited in the neighbourhood against the perpetrators of this daring outrage. Lord Vancourt did not, of course, appear, being still on his travels, nobody knew where, not even Lord Mervyn; but one of the leading counsel was employed (everybody said by his lordship, *sub rosa*) to defend his two underkeepers or night watchers, who had remained prisoners ever since the commission of the offence; the wounded man, now in a fair way of recovery, having turned king's evidence. One of the most talented as well as gentlemanly men at the bar, named Whalley, had been retained by Malcolm to conduct the prosecution; the sharp-witted, browbeating Serjeant Wrangler appeared for the defence.

Mr. Whalley, in his opening address to the jury, commented in severe terms upon the monstrous nature of the offence, by which the lives of two persons had been nearly sacrificed, characterising it also as one of the most violent, wanton, and disgraceful outrages attempted by any man professing to be a gentleman.

The first person called to prove the assault and attempted abduction was Blanche Douglas, who entered the court attended by her aunt Gordon and Lord Malcolm; and her counsel, pitying her extreme agitation on entering the witness-box, merely asked a few questions as to Lord Vancourt's attempts to drag her from the carriage, and her previous rejection of his addresses. Having thanked her for her replies, Mr. Whalley said it was unnecessary for him to trouble her further, and was resuming his seat, when Serjeant Wrangler immediately rose, and addressing poor Blanche, who was turning to leave her unpleasant position, apologised in the blandest manner, and in the softest tones he could assume, for detaining her from her friends a few minutes longer.

"You were acquainted, I believe, Miss Douglas, with Lord Vancourt some time previously to this unfortunate affair on Marston Common?"

"A very short time only, sir," was the reply.

"You met his lordship, I think, first at Marston Castle, where you were staying on a visit to Lord and Lady Mervyn?"

"Yes," was the faint response.

"You found him, I dare say, as others have, a very agreeable, entertaining companion, extremely courteous and deferential to ladies, and in no wise forward or presuming in their society?"

No answer being returned, Serjeant Wrangler paused a moment, directing a smiling, self-satisfied look at the jury, to attract their attention to this admission in his favour, adjusting, at the same time, his gown with the air of counsel when confident of success.

"Confound that knave!" whispered Malcolm to Mrs. Gordon; "he will lead that timorous, unsuspecting girl into admissions which will play the devil with us, and herself also; but stay here a moment, aunt, whilst I hand a line or two to Whalley," which he wrote on the crown of his hat, and the next moment a little cramped note was handed up on the point of a stick by Malcolm's attorney to his counsel, which being read, was answered by a nod of the head. Serjeant Wrangler was meanwhile attempting to improve the case by other exactions.

"There's no doubt, Miss Douglas, you felt pleased and gratified, perhaps something more, by the polite attentions of this handsome, highly-gifted young nobleman?"

"My lord," exclaimed Whalley, suddenly rising before his opponent's question could be answered, "I object to that question and the course of cross-examination adopted by my learned friend, who is trying to obtain admissions from Miss Douglas, which, from her youth and inexperience of practice in law courts, will be used to her disadvantage; and I must caution her not to notice these impertinent insinuations."

"The last question," said the judge, "was scarcely fair, Mr. Wrangler; conveying an inference which you had no right to make."

"I bow to your decision, my lord," replied Wrangler, no wise disconcerted by this rebuke. "I can easily obtain my point in another way."

This little altercation, however, had opened Blanche's eyes and understanding as to what Mr. Serjeant Wrangler was aiming at; and the spirit of the Douglases came to her rescue, to retort upon her crafty interrogator.

"You were in the habit, Miss Douglas, I believe, when at Marston Castle, of frequently driving and walking alone with Lord Vancourt?"

"No, I was not," answered Blanche, in a firm voice, which was distinctly audible in the court.

"Bravo! Miss Blanche," shouted a voice from the crowd near the door; "give it the rascally lawyer in turn."

"I beg pardon, Miss Douglas," continued her tormentor; "but we have evidence to prove you were seen several times walking alone with his lordship."

"Twice only—when invited to take a walk by Miss Mervyn, I was left alone, as I believed, purposely, to Lord Vancourt's attentions, which being disagreeable to me, I never again accompanied Miss Mervyn in her walks."

"Still, Miss Douglas, notwithstanding Lord Vancourt's attentions being, as you state, so disagreeable, you accepted him as a partner at the Cherrington Ball, not for one only, but for two quadrilles; and dancing twice the same evening with the same partner is generally considered a very particular favour."

"I accepted Lord Vancourt for the second dance in obedience to my aunt Mrs. Harcourt's commands, and most certainly contrary to my own inclination, being previously engaged to Major Hammond for that set."

"Well, Miss Douglas, we, who cannot enter into the fancies and feelings of young ladies, must judge by their acts; and I should certainly consider it an act of encouragement in any lady accepting me twice for a partner. Mammas and aunts are very convenient personages sometimes to fall back upon."

Blanche feeling too indignant to make any reply to this impertinent inuendo, Serjeant Wrangler, with another significant look at the jury, proceeded—

"It was only two days after this ball at Cherrington, when you danced twice with him, that Lord Vancourt wrote a formal proposal for your hand, Miss Douglas; and I can scarcely imagine that his lordship, a thorough man of the world, moving in the highest circles, well acquainted with the etiquette and forms generally observed on such occasions, and, as you admit, most courteous and deferential to ladies—neither forward nor presuming—would have committed such an act of folly as making a proposal for a young lady, unless fully satisfied in his own mind that he had good grounds for believing his offer would be accepted."

"I never gave Lord Vancourt," replied Blanche, indignantly, "the slightest encouragement in any way, having taken a dislike to him from the first; but, as an acquaintance of my Aunt Harcourt, I could not behave rudely to him whilst I was living under her protection at Throseby."

"Oh! of course not, Miss Douglas!" added Wrangler, with a sneer. "The letter addressed to your guardian, Mr. Harcourt, by Lord Vancourt, containing the proposal, was, I presume, submitted to your perusal, and the answer which was returned?"

"No, sir. I neither saw nor knew the contents of the letter written by my guardian in reply; but, when asked by my aunt what answer should be returned, I told her most distinctly that nothing should ever induce me to accept the addresses of Lord Vancourt.

"Very strange, Miss Douglas, when Mr. Harcourt's letter appears to me to warrant our arriving at a very opposite conclusion."

"I shall prove, sir," exclaimed Mr. Whalley, suddenly starting up, "by another witness, that Miss Douglas did, positively and unconditionally, refuse Lord Vancourt's proposals; and also the base, nefarious plot concocted at Mervyn Castle to impose such a worthless person as Lord Vancourt upon an artless, unsuspecting young lady; into which, I am sorry to add, Miss Douglas's guardian was unwittingly dragged by the false representations made to him there of Lord Vancourt's high character and large fortune; the latter, no doubt, of great weight with guardians generally."

During this short address, Serjeant Wrangler sat down; and Mr. Whalley, politely apologising to Miss Douglas for the annoyance she had experienced from her cross-examination, said she was now at liberty to rejoin her friends. Poor Blanche, as soon as handed down from the witness-box to a seat below, occupied by her aunt and Constance, overcome by the excessive heat of the court, as well as overpowered by her outraged feelings, fell into a swoon, from which Malcolm and Mrs. Gordon were attempting to rouse her, when Beauchamp (followed by Stiles and young Hazel) sprang to her relief.

Without a moment's hesitation, and before Malcolm could guess his intentions, the fainting form of Blanche Douglas was quickly raised in Beauchamp's arms (the two bold yeomen making way for his advance) carried out of court, and placed on a sofa in the magistrates' waiting-room.

"Quick, neighbour Hazel," cried Stiles, "for a jug of cold water, whilst I throw up the windows."

Blanche, unconscious of what had occurred, soon revived by the cold air and still colder water applied to her forehead and face, and Mrs. Gordon's carriage being in waiting, she was driven immediately home to the Priory, accompanied by her aunt and

Constance; Malcolm and Beauchamp being obliged to return to the court.

The next witness called by Mr. Whalley was Alice Hayward, Blanche's maid.

"You went with your young mistress, I believe, to Marston Castle, in the month of —— last?"

"Yes, sir."

"You saw Lord Vancourt there, I conclude?"

"Yes, sir—several times."

"So that you would be sure to know him again?"

"Oh, yes; he was a very particular-looking gentleman."

"Was he very particular in his attentions to your young lady, Miss Douglas?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Did she ever go out walking or driving with him alone?"

"No, sir; Miss Blanche would never dream of doing such a thing with a stranger."

"With whom then did she generally set out for a walk?"

"With Miss Mervyn, sir, accompanied sometimes by Lord Vancourt and Mr. Vernon."

"Did Miss Douglas ever allude to these walks on returning to her room?"

"Yes, sir; the day before we left the Castle, she told me she felt so annoyed by Miss Mervyn and Mr. Vernon's conduct, in leaving her purposely, as she believed, twice alone with Lord Vancourt, that she would never walk with her again."

"Did she keep to this resolution?"

"Yes, sir; the next morning, when Miss Mervyn entered her room, asking her to walk, she pleaded a bad headache, and would not go down-stairs till Mrs. Harcourt's carriage came to the door to take us home."

"Did Miss Douglas ever make any other remarks to you about Lord Vancourt?"

"She said, the night before she quitted Marston Castle, that she was very glad that their visit was finished; that although entertaining sometimes, she had taken a great dislike to Lord Vancourt, and hoped never to meet him again."

"Do you remember anything particular occurring two days after the ball at Cherrington?"

"Yes, sir; after luncheon, Miss Blanche on that day ran up to her room, and began sobbing and crying as if her heart would break, because Mrs. Harcourt called her an ungrateful girl for refusing Lord Vancourt; 'but I could not marry such a man, Alice; indeed, I never would,' she said, 'if Aunt Harcourt turned me out of her house for refusing him.' 'No more wouldn't I, my dear young mistress,' said I, 'even to be made a lady of!' Then, the next morning, over comes Mrs. Gordon, and orders me to pack up her things directly, as Miss Blanche shouldn't stop another hour at Throseby, to be worried about that good-for-nothing man, Lord Vancourt, who, I heard her tell Mrs. Harcourt, was no better than he should be."

"Well, Alice," interposed Mr. Whalley, "that will do; now tell me what happened on the night you left the Priory to return to Throseby?"

Alice having related all the adventures on that occasion, with some comments of her own, was then asked if she could positively swear to Lord Vancourt being the man who attempted to drag her mistress from the carriage; and on this point being most positive, Mr. Whalley said he need not detain her any longer, and Serjeant Wrangler prudently declined preventing her standing down from the witness-box.

Robert Conyers, examined by Mr. Whalley:—

"How long have you known Miss Douglas?"

"Since childhood."

"Have you had any opportunities of knowing her true character and disposition?"

"Very many—having narrowly observed her, from being on very intimate terms with her relatives; and for the last two years she has been more immediately under my own eye, from my instructing her in riding."

"What has been your opinion of her, Mr. Conyers?"

"She has ever been a timid, gentle girl, of a very affectionate but retiring disposition, with strong religious principles."

"You were aware, I believe, of Lord Vancourt being invited to Marston Castle, and Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt being asked to spend a few days there at the same time, with their ward, Miss Douglas?"

"I was, sir; and two days previously to their leaving Throseby, I warned Miss Douglas of the plot which had been concocted to ensnare her, and the character I had heard of Lord Vancourt, at which she was exceedingly astonished."

"You attended, I believe, the ball at Cherrington, and overheard a conversation between Lord Vancourt and Mr. Vernon there, relative to this attempted abduction?"

"Yes, I did."

"Did you notice Miss Douglas's behaviour, whilst dancing with Lord Vancourt?"

"Particularly; well knowing her dislike to the man, and the imploring look she cast on me, when he came to claim her hand for the dance, determined me to take my position close to her, whilst dancing with his lordship."

"Thank you, Mr. Conyers;" and as Whalley sat down, up rose the Serjeant instantly.

"You say, Mr. Conyers, you warned Miss Douglas of the plot contrived against her, and of Lord Vancourt's character, two days before she went to stay at the castle? I should have thought, sir, the first person you ought to have made acquainted with this pretended plot was Mr. Harcourt, the young lady's guardian?"

"I thought differently, Mr. Serjeant Wrangler; but I directly informed Mrs. Gordon, her other guardian, of all I had heard, to whose discretion I could more safely confide this matter; and from what occurred subsequently, I am quite satisfied that she was the most proper person to be consulted."

"You had good reasons, no doubt, sir, for trying to prevent Miss Douglas marrying Lord Vancourt? you have heard of a friend in need being a friend indeed, and Mr. William Beauchamp is, I am told, a very particular friend of yours?"

"Mr. Beauchamp *is*, sir, I am proud to say, a very particular friend of mine; a man of high principles, honourable feelings, and sound, good sense—the latter much needed by Mr. Serjeant Wrangler; for how a learned barrister could have laboured, as you have done this day, to prove an absurdity, patent to the commonest understanding, I cannot comprehend; you are striving to prove the consent of Miss Douglas to elope with Lord Vancourt. Now, sir, *giving* you the admission you try in vain to obtain, that she was a silly girl, caught at first sight by the handsome person of this man, and despising all the warnings she had received of his true character, want of fortune, and lastly, of his actually being a married man; why, what on earth should induce her to elope with him—her guardian consenting to his proposals? for Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt, blind to the revelations made to them, persisted to the last in taking his lordship's part, and the lady almost insisted on her niece marrying him. With these facts clear before you, how can you hope to persuade a child of ten years old, much less twelve men of common sense, that there existed any pretence whatever for Miss Douglas consenting to run away with

Lord Vancourt, nearly four hundred miles, to be married, when she could have been married at the parish church with her guardian's approval? This is all nonsense, Mr. Serjeant Wrangler, perfectly absurd; and you are wasting the time of the court to no purpose."

"Such is not my opinion, Mr. Conyers; but I do not wish to occupy more of *your* time, which seems so precious to you; nor to be favoured with another long-winded oration, which I have in vain attempted to interrupt."

CHAPTER XXVI.

Thomas Carter next deposed to the conversation he overheard between Vernon and Harley on the evening of the day on which the hounds met at Marston Castle, and having given his evidence, was turning to go down, when Serjeant Wrangler exclaimed—"Stop, Mr. Carter, I have a word or two to say to you. So, you audacious traitor and eavesdropper, you have had the assurance to swear that you heard all this trumped-up story through a thick mahogany door?"

"Yes, sir, I did—every word of it."

"Then you were in the habit, I conclude, of always listening at doors, to take some news into the servants' hall?"

"No, sir, I never did it before or since; but hearing the young squire's name mentioned in a loud, angry tone by Mr. Vernon, I thought some mischief was brewing against him, and so stopped to hear what it was."

"And now you are in Lord Malcolm's service, you have determined to make out this cock-and-bull story, which you think sensible men, like the gentlemen of the jury, will believe from a discharged, worthless servant like yourself, who couldn't get a character from your last place."

"I was not discharged, sir, from Lord Mervyn's service, but gave warning to leave, and never asked his lordship for a character."

"No, I should think not, Thomas Carter, as you know well enough you had not the remotest chance of getting one."

"My character is as good as yours," retorted Carter, "any day in the week."

"Get down out of the box, you impudent liar," almost screamed Wrangler; "I won't condescend to ask you another question."

William Beauchamp was then called, who related in a clear, straightforward manner all that passed under his observation on the night of the attempted abduction, for which, having been thanked by Mr. Whalley, he was then addressed by the Serjeant.

"Pray, Mr. Beauchamp, will you oblige me by stating from whom you obtained the information which directed you to Marston Common on that night?"

"That question, sir," replied Beauchamp, "I believe you cannot legally insist on my answering, although I should not hesitate in giving a reply to any other counsel except Serjeant Wrangler."

"And why not to me, Mr. Beauchamp?"

"Simply because you have adopted a coarse, bullying manner towards the witnesses placed in this box to-day, to which I give you fair notice I shall not submit."

"I am not responsible to you, Mr. Beauchamp, for the course of examination I choose to pursue towards other witnesses."

"I am not quite sure of that, Mr. Serjeant Wrangler, when you attempt to take away the character of a poor man whom I have known from boyhood, and whose daily bread depends upon his honesty."

"And do you call Thomas Carter an honest man, to betray his master?"

"Yes, sir, and a virtuous one too, to incur the risk of losing place and character in his attempt to save an innocent girl from a fate worse than death—from being made the victim of a dark, villanous conspiracy to rob her of her fair name and fortune, and consign her to the power of as unprincipled a scoundrel as ever trod the earth."

A murmur of applause ran through the court at this manly speech, which having subsided, Mr. Serjeant Wrangler continued in a subdued tone: "I did not ask you for the expression of your own particular opinion on this subject, Mr. Beauchamp, with which we are well acquainted, and the motives which suggested your remarks."

"My opinion, sir, will be the opinion of every disinterested person in this court at the conclusion of the trial, and I warn you to address no further impertinent language to myself, or question my motives, or——"

"What, sir?" interrupted Wrangler, now losing his temper; "I may expect a horse-whipping, I suppose?"

"Which would not be the first time," added Beauchamp, "that a well-merited castigation of that kind had been inflicted on the back of Serjeant Wrangler." A burst of laughter followed this announcement, during which the Serjeant fumed and fretted impatiently, showing by his fierce looks and quivering lips the storm raging within his breast; but the cool, determined eye of Beauchamp fixed steadily upon his face, whilst a contemptuous smile curled his upper lip, warned him that he had met his match, and whispering his junior counsel to continue the cross-examination, he sat down, saying he would not submit to these indecorous outbreaks, which were disgraceful to any court of justice.

The junior counsel, Mr. Sweetman, a tall, thin young man, the reverse in appearance and manners to Serjeant Wrangler, then attempted to draw Beauchamp into a confession of being the aggressor in the affray, by first striking Lord Vancourt.

"I was *not* the aggressor, sir," replied Beauchamp, in a firm voice; "for Lord Vancourt had seized Miss Douglas by the arm, and was trying to drag her from the carriage when I reached the spot. I then pushed him away, and attempted to shut the carriage-door, upon which, instantly drawing a pistol, he fired at me, the ball grazing my face; and seeing him again trying to draw another pistol from his pocket, it was then, and not till then, that in defence of my own life I shot him through the arm, to disable him from committing further outrage, not to take his life; for had I been so inclined, I could, without doubt, have shot him dead on the spot."

"You appear to have been actuated by a very chivalrous feeling, Mr. Beauchamp, in rushing to the rescue of this young lady—perhaps I might say by a stronger impulse."

"I was actuated by that spirit, sir, which is dominant in the breast of every true Englishman—to protect a defenceless woman from insult and outrage." Again a cheer arose from the densely-crowded court.

"From what occurred, Mr. Beauchamp, after Miss Douglas quitted the witness-box this day, I think there can be little doubt by what feelings you were really actuated."

"You are now treading on dangerous ground, sir," replied Beauchamp, indignantly, "by presuming to question my motives, or to doubt my words."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Beauchamp, if I have given you offence, and can only say it was not so intended by me."

"There was sufficient cause for my rushing to the rescue of my sister's dearest friend," continued Beauchamp.

"Oh, certainly, Mr. Beauchamp; but evidently the young lady was your friend also, if not something more."

"Then, sir, by your own showing, it is not possible she could have been a consenting party to this projected elopement, which your learned brother has been so fruitlessly attempting to prove."

A sharp tug at his gown brought the young barrister immediately to his seat, Wrangler whispering in his ear, "Sit down, sir; you are playing the devil with our case!"

A triumphant smile played over the features of Mr. Whalley as he inquired of Mr. Sweetman whether he wished to ask Mr. Beauchamp any more questions.

"No, sir," was the curt reply.

Mark Rosier then ascended the witness-box, and gave his evidence in a short, conclusive manner, maintaining the fact of Beauchamp being shot at first by Lord Vancourt, and his being wounded in the side by John Thompson, who had turned king's evidence, identifying also the two prisoners, Harding and Jones, as participators in the affray.

"In fact, sir," said Mark, pointing to a scar under his eye, "this is a little favour from Mr. Harding's cudgel, which 'll remind me of that gentleman for some time to come."

"I must trouble you with a few questions, Mr. Rosier," exclaimed Serjeant Wrangler, as he was leaving the box.

"No trouble at all, sir," replied Mark, good-humouredly.

"I think, Mr. Rosier, you are a person of that profession which filches pheasants and other game from gentlemen's preserves?"

"And I think, Mr. Serjeant Wrangler," retorted Mark, boldly looking his adversary in the face and mimicking him to the life, "you are a person of that profession which filches money from gentlemen's pockets;" which caused a loud laugh among the crowd.

"How dare you, sir, speak to me in that disrespectful language?" demanded Wrangler, looking red-hot with passion.

"How dare you, sir, accuse me of robbing gentlemen's preserves? I'll make you prove your words, Lawyer Wrangler, trying to take away poor men's characters."

"Will you tell me, Mr. Rosier, that you have never killed game belonging to some gentlemen even now in this court?"

"I won't tell you, sir, whether I have or not, because you ha'n't any right to ask such questions; but I'll answer that to any real gentleman in this court, or out of it, that puts it in a civil way."

"So you pretend to swear, Mr. Rosier, that on this dark night, when a man could scarcely see his hand before his face, you saw Lord Vancourt fire at Mr. Beauchamp, you being ten yards distant from him?"

"I didn't say ten yards, sir, as I wasn't five from the young squire at the time, and if 'twere as dark again I could have seen the flash in the pan, and which side it come from."

"And how did you know Lord Vancourt so well, Mr. Rosier, as to distinguish him on this dark night from other men?"

"Because I had seen him several times, sir, afore, and he wasn't a man to be mistaken for another."

"Oh, very handsome, I suppose?"

"No, sir, he warn't that to my mind; but a tall, long-legged chap, with a large hook nose, and rat's eyes, with shaggy eyebrows, and black whiskers."

"And pray, Mr. Mark, what was the reward you got from Mr. Beauchamp for preventing this runaway match?"

"Well, sir, I baint quite so sharp a hand as a lawyer to pocket the fee aforehand, and I ha'n't got nothing yet but this scar in the face and a dig in the back from that cowardly valet; and as to Miss Blanche running away with this long-legged lord, she'd ha' served him in the same fashion, if he hadn't held her arm, as the pretty chambermaid at the King's Head served you last night when you took liberties with her, by giving him a good smack in his face."

Roars of laughter followed, which for some few minutes it was impossible to suppress, and even the grave features of the judge relaxed into a smile.

"I appeal to your lordship," cried the excited Wrangler, "to commit this witness for contempt of court!"

"Contempt of counsel, you ought to have said, Mr. Serjeant Wrangler," replied the judge; "but if gentlemen of the bar will play with edged tools, they must take the consequences; in such cases I never interfere."

"Very well, my lord, then I shall sit down."

The last witness called for the prosecution was the wounded man, John Thomson, who underwent a long cross-examination, without his evidence being in the least shaken. His story was too simple and truthful to be contravened. He and his two accomplices received ten pounds each from Lord Vancourt's valet, called François le Blanc, to assist his lordship in carrying off Miss Douglas, and were to receive ten pounds more from the head keeper the next morning, when the job was done, who engaged they should not lose their situations, if found out. He did not know whether Lord Mervyn was privy to the plot or not, and would only say what he knew to be true.

No witness being called for the defence, as Serjeant Wrangler had not one he could trust in cross-examination, the judge then addressed the jury, telling them the case was so exceedingly clear against the prisoners, that it was unnecessary for him to detain them with any remarks upon the evidence; and immediately after, the foreman rising, said they had not a moment's hesitation in returning a verdict of guilty against both prisoners, which was received with loud shouts and waving of ladies' handkerchiefs, and one cheer more from the farmers who thronged the court. When silence was restored, the judge, after a severe lecture to the prisoners on the enormity of the offence in which they had been implicated, and the murderous nature of the assault, by which several lives had been so nearly sacrificed, sentenced them to two years' imprisonment with hard labour.

Before they were removed from the bar, Lord Malcolm rose, requesting permission to say a few words in mitigation of the sentence just pronounced upon the prisoners, which being conceded, he begged to assure his lordship that his sole object in commencing this prosecution having been to vindicate his cousin's fair name from any complicity or the shadow of suspicion of being in the remotest degree a consenting party to this pretended elopement with Lord Vancourt, he could derive no satisfaction from the punishment of these men, who were the least guilty.

"Of the principal, my lord, I can only say, that I think scarcely any punishment would be too severe, and his case is the more aggravated from the vile attempts to cast aspersions on my cousin's character, by endeavouring to prove her capable of falling in love and agreeing to elope with a married man, for as such Lord Vancourt was represented to her and myself before meeting him at the Cherrington ball. From the first day of his introduction to her at Marston Castle, my cousin entertained a decided antipathy to him, having often told me she felt quite terrified in his presence, from the fierce expression of his looks when excited; and I am quite certain, had his character and conduct been unexceptionable, nothing would have induced her to marry Lord Vancourt. I hold in my hand, my lord, a letter which of itself would prove the concoction of this plot at Marston Castle, written by one of its chief projectors, wholly unsolicited by me (and whose handwriting is well known to many in this court), making a full disclosure of this nefarious scheme. For reasons which your lordship will understand when seeing the signature, I have forborne to have this letter publicly read in court, but as at once establishing the entire truth of Thomas Carter's evidence, I now submit it to your lordship's perusal."

The judge having read it carefully through, returned it to Lord Malcolm, saying, "I fully appreciate your honourable motives, Lord Malcolm, in withholding this incontestable proof of the origin of this disgraceful conspiracy, which fully confirms all Thomas Carter has asserted."

"May I hope, then, my lord, you will remit a portion of the punishment awarded to the prisoners at the bar, who have both young families depending upon them? and considering that they have already been imprisoned some time, I think six months longer will answer the ends of justice."

"The offence of which they have been convicted is a very serious one, Lord Malcolm, but at your intercession the term shall be abridged."

The two prisoners fell on their knees, expressing their contrition and gratitude to Lord Malcolm for his kindness, who, after thanking the judge, left the court.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The hunting season had now drawn to its close, the last appointment made for Bampton House, and invitations sent by the old squire to all the neighbouring families for a grand dinner party, to conclude with a ball in the evening on the day when the hounds met on the lawn for the last day's hunting. With the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt, whose conduct in reference to their ward since the trial had been severely commented upon, as highly reprehensible, if nothing worse, no excuses were received from any other family, so that the long dining-table was crowded with guests, a second table being laid out for the juniors, at which Fred Beauchamp presided, as many more arrived than were expected; in fact, the hospitality of the old squire was so unbounded, and his dinner parties so agreeable and devoid of formality, that the heads of families did not scruple to take any friends who might be staying with them at the time.

Constance, supported on one hand by Lord Malcolm, and Sir Lionel on the other, did the honours with her accustomed grace, faced by the old squire, who divided his attentions between Lady Markham and Mrs. Compton. Will Beauchamp sat between Mrs. Gordon and Blanche, the latter having Captain Markham on her right hand; Gwynne, Conyers, Tyler, Coventry, and others ranging themselves in order or out of order, without regard to priority or ceremony, with the partners they had selected. Selina, who always felt more at home with the old squire than in her own house, kept the middle of the table in an uproar by her quaint and witty sayings, which no frowns from Lady Markham could suppress.

"Ah!" she remarked to Conyers, "mamma may shake her head at me till she shakes it off, Bob, but I am on the right side of the fence to-night, with the old squire to back me up. But who on earth is that fright of a woman opposite, with a face like a cook?"

"Hush! Selina; that is Mrs. Winterbottom, the wife of that little round-faced, red-nosed man, sitting next Mrs. Compton; a retired brewer, who has lately purchased a large estate lying between the Holt and the forest, so that the squire was obliged to do the civil thing, and invite him to Bampton, to save the foxes."

"Goodness! what a name, Bob: she may feel very wintry below, but there is more than summer heat above, to judge by those peony-looking cheeks."

Gwynne, who sat next to the lady, seeing the sort of person he had to deal with, kept plying her with champagne every time it was handed round the table, until she exclaimed, "Lorks, Sir Lucius, I feel quite swipey already."

"Oh, never mind," replied Gwynne, ready to burst with suppressed laughter; "champagne goes for nothing, just puts people into spirits—that's all."

"Heavens, what a woman!" exclaimed Selina, in fits of laughter; "*swipey* already! Why, Bob, she will be roaring drunk before dinner is over, and under the table."

"By Jove! Selina, if you run on in this fashion, I must bolt, as I am nearly choked already in bolting my dinner; pray be quiet, can't you?"

"*C'est impossible*, Bob; can't be done. I have set my mind on a regular spree to-night, and suspect my situation before morning will be about the same as Mrs. Featherbottom's—I shall feel *demmed swipey*. Eh! aw! the Captain looks as if he had swallowed his fork instead of his fish; what does he say, Bob?"

"That you are a deuced deal too bad, Selina, 'pon honour."

"Oh, indeed! perhaps the life-guardsman intends changing Miss Winterbottom into Mrs. Markham; lots of tin, I suppose, with beer and stout gratis."

At this moment, the old squire, wishing to show every civility to Mrs. Winterbottom, requested the honour of taking wine with her.

"Why, really, Squire Beauchamp," replied the lady appealed to, "I mus'n't refuse *you*, I suppose; but my neighbour here, Sir Lucius, has been flushing my glass with champagne, until I am become, as our John says, uncomfortably lushy."

"Then let me recommend," said the squire (scarcely able to preserve his gravity during the titters which followed this speech), "a glass of good old sherry, which will set all to rights again."

"I'll take your advice, Squire Beauchamp, as that *wishy-washy* stuff always makes me feel as if I had the cholica mobus."

"Mercy on us!" cried Selina; "that summer-topped woman will be the death of me, Bob; but my lady mamma looks unutterable things, wondering, no doubt, how the old squire dare ask her to sit at table with such a person as Mrs. Winterbottom."

"Well, Selina, it can't be helped now, and I daresay my old friend feels uncomfortable enough at such vulgarity; but her better half is passable enough, and the daughter tolerably presentable and good-looking, and a fortune of a hundred thousand pounds (so report goes) will make her a very handsome girl."

"Ay, ay, Bob, money is the magnifying glass; the most plain, disagreeable woman becomes a perfect houri in the eyes of some men, when bedecked with jewels and lacquered very with gold dust; but what would Will Beauchamp say to Miss Winterbottom, with her hundred thousand pounds?"

"That she might remain Miss Winterbottom to the end of her life, for anything he would insinuate to the contrary, Selina; and Bob Conyers is pretty much of the same opinion."

"Glad to hear you say so, Bob, for I began to think you might be caught by a golden hook at last."

"No, no, my dear girl; I shall not make a fool of myself in my old age by marrying a person with whom I could have no community of feelings or ideas, and who does not know a duck from a goose, except on the table, perhaps not there."

"But, Bob, don't you think our funny friend opposite looks rather too much of a chicken about her gills?"

"What can you mean, Selina?"

"Too juvenile about her locks or head gear; don't you understand?—borrowed feathers."

"Oh! I see, wears a wig—gad! it looks very like one; but, by Jupiter! the murder's out," exclaimed he, as one of the footmen, in reaching over Mrs. Winterbottom, to place a dish on the table, caught the button of his sleeve in her hair, dragging off her head-dress, and exposing her closely-cropped cranium to view.

"Drat the man!" cried Mrs. Winterbottom, aiming a blow at the astonished footman, which taking effect on Gwynne's nose, nearly knocked him out of his chair.

"What's the fool staring at?" (as he stood for a moment perfectly aghast at the exposure he had occasioned, and then tried to repair the mischief by replacing the head-dress, the back part in front, thereby eliciting renewed laughter). "Let it alone, I say, you stupid oaf!"

And, with a jerk or two on either side, the infuriated lady succeeded in adjusting her attire.

"Ah! miss," she said, addressing Selina, "you may laugh now, but the time will come when you will be glad enough to sail under false colours, if you don't already, with your pink and white cheeks."

"If I do paint my face, Mrs. Summertop," retorted Selina, "it isn't of one colour, like yours, *red entire*."

"My name isn't Summertop, Miss Imperanse, but Winterbottom."

"Oh, indeed, ma'am; very aristocratic, euphonious name, no doubt, in the frozen regions of Lapland, whence, I conclude, your origin is derived; but the Fates defend me from being a Winterbottom—half hot, half cold—or a mermaid in petticoats."

Gwynne, fearing some violent explosion between the now infuriated fair ones, addressed some observation to the excited dame near him, which checked further retorts; and good order once more prevailed, to the great delight of the more staid portion of the company, who began to feel very uncomfortable as to the issue of this combat of words between the two female belligerents.

Beauchamp whispered to Blanche—"I suspect Bob will have his hands over-full, should he prevail on Selina to become Mrs. Conyers—poor fellow! he will be ever in hot water, with her cutting speeches; the 'Taming of the Shrew' is nothing in comparison with the work he will have to perform in reducing Selina to anything like orderly conduct."

"She is really very provoking sometimes," replied Blanche; "and says such extraordinary things, that strangers must think her a most eccentric person, and very ill-natured; but what would you do, William, with such a wife?"

"I should very soon do without her, Blanche, if by any fatality such a lot could be assigned me."

"You would not feel jealous of her, William, would you?" she inquired, with an arch smile.

"No, my dear; I never could love her sufficiently for that feeling to arise."

"Well, then, I think, Mr. Will, I shall attempt to say smart, sharp things like Selina, to keep flatterers at a distance."

"Reserve and dignity of manners are sufficient repellents, my dear girl, without sarcasm or invective, to which I am quite sure my own dear Blanche, from her naturally gentle disposition, will never have recourse."

"My dear William, you think me a great deal more perfect than I am; but I must try to keep up to your standard. And now, as Constance is rising, don't sit too long over your wine, or (in a whisper) get tipsy, *mio caro*."

When the ladies left the room, Sir Lionel rebuked Bob Conyers for not keeping his daughter in better order during dinner.

"Ay, ay, Sir Lionel," retorted Bob, "very pretty, indeed, to lecture me about keeping her in order, after you have been allowing her to run riot all her life at Barton Court; and now, finding her incorrigible, you expect I am to pull her up all at once, like a confirmed runaway horse."

"Well, Conyers, you will always have it that the most mischievous puppies make the best hounds. So, by your own argument, Selina will make a good wife, when she is entered for matrimony."

Leaving the gentlemen to discuss their wine and politics, we will now turn our attention to the ladies.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

To make amends for Selina's rudeness to Mrs. Winterbottom, Constance deemed it incumbent on her to smooth that lady's ruffled feathers by introducing her to Mrs. Gordon and Blanche; and she so far succeeded in restoring her to a more complacent state of mind, when, other company beginning to arrive, her attentions were required elsewhere. Miss Honoria Winterbottom, in addition to very pretty, intelligent features, was highly accomplished also, and presented so striking a contrast to her mamma, that few could believe her to be descended from a stock so plebeian; and both Mrs. Gordon and Blanche were much pleased with her unassuming manners, which, in a great measure, compensated for her mother's great deficiency in those essentials.

As Beauchamp entered the ball-room, his eyes beamed with delight on beholding Blanche Douglas seated by the side of the young stranger, whom he believed she was patronising on his account; and he was advancing towards her, when Captain Markham arrested his progress for a moment.

"Beauchamp, my good fellow, just introduce me to that girl, Miss Winter, will you. Oh! demmit, what a name! eh! ah! unpronounceable; but, 'pon honour, she is a devilish fine girl, notwithstanding that she-dragon of a mother; they say, lots of tin into the bargain."

"Come on then, Markham." And in a few seconds the life-guardsman, having made his bow, was parading Miss Honoria round the room, in defiance of the sneers and jesting remarks of his sister, Selina.

On accepting his proffered arm, Beauchamp thanked Blanche for her kind attention to the nameless young lady.

"This I consider, dear girl, as a personal favour to my father and myself, after Selina's rude behaviour, at dinner, to her mother."

ground and thought. When he looked up the man of the woods had gone.

'It is not good,' said a calm voice from the thicket, 'for friends to be angry. Wait till the evening, Sahib, when the air cools.'

Left to himself thus, dropped as it were in the heart of the *rukh*, Gisborne swore, then laughed, remounted his pony, and rode on. He visited a ranger's hut, overlooked a couple of new plantations, left some orders as to the burning of a patch of dry grass, and set out for a camping-ground of his own choice, a pile of splintered rocks roughly roofed over with branches and leaves not far from the banks of the Kanye stream. It was twilight when he came in sight of his resting-place, and the *rukh* was waking to the hushed ravenous life of the night.

A camp-fire flickered on the knoll, and there was the smell of a very good dinner in the wind.

'Um,' said Gisborne, 'that's better than cold meat at any rate. Now the only man who'd be likely to be here'd be Muller, and, officially, he ought to be looking over the Changamanga *rukh*. I suppose that's why he's on my ground.'

The gigantic German who was the head of the Woods and Forests of all India, Head Ranger from Burma to Bombay, had a habit of flitting bat-like without warning from one place to another, and turning up exactly where he was least looked for.

His theory was that sudden visitations, the discovery of shortcomings and a word-of-mouth upbraidment of a subordinate were infinitely better than the slow processes of correspondence, which might end in a written and official reprimand—a thing in after years to be counted against a Forest Officer's record. As he explained it: 'If I only talk to my boys like a Dutch uncle, dey say, "It was only dot damned old Muller," and dey do better next dime. But if my fat-head clerk he write and say dot Muller der Inspecdor-General fail to onderstand and is much annoyed, first dot does no goot because I am not dere, and second der fool dot comes after me he may say to my best boys: "Mein Gott! you haf been wigged by my bredecessor." I tell you der big brass-hat pizness does not make der trees grow.'

Muller's deep voice was coming out of the darkness behind the firelight as he bent over the shoulders of his pet cook. 'Not so much sauce, you son of Belial! Worcester sauce he is a gondiment and not a fluid. Ah, Gisborne, you haf come to a very bad dinner. Where is your camp?' and he walked up to shake hands.

'I'm the camp, sir,' said Gisborne. 'I didn't know you were about here.'

Muller looked at the young man's trim figure. 'Goot! That is very goot! One horse and some cold things to eat. When I was young I did my camp so. Now you shall dine with me. I went wish he'd take a fancy to our Honoria; and a hundred thousand pounds down aint to be sneered at."

"That's more than I do," thought Blanche, as she rose to take the arm of Sir Lucius, to whom she was engaged for the next quadrille.

"Well, ma'am," continued Mrs. Winterbottom to Aunt Gordon, "that Sir Lucius seems a good sort of a body—looks and speaks like a gentleman, but he is a plain piece of goods, and won't do after the young squire. Lady Gwynne would sound very well, no doubt, but then Honoria says she won't marry any one she don't fall desperately in love with; and I shouldn't fancy the baronet myself, even at my time of life."

"Then," asked Aunt Gordon, not a little amused, "what do you think of Captain Markham? he is heir to a baronetcy, and will succeed to a beautiful place and large fortune on Sir Lionel's decease."

"He's too much of a fop to please me, Mrs. Gordon, although tolerably good-looking and gentleman-like; but papa can't endure dandies, and they would never agree, I'm sure. No, ma'am, if I had the pick and choose of the room, the young squire would come out first; and as you and he seem great friends, can't you just give him a hint that we sha'n't be particular about a few odd thousands, if he fancies our Honor?"

"You may rest assured on one point," replied Mrs. Gordon, "that Mr. William Beauchamp will never marry for money, and any allusion to your daughter's large expectations would be quite sufficient to keep him at a distance from her."

"Oh, goodness me! then pray don't mention the subject, my dear madam," said Mrs. Winterbottom, "for here he comes with Honoria."

After addressing a few words to the mamma on resigning her daughter, Beauchamp sat down by Mrs. Gordon, saying, "You must not think me rude, dear aunt, if I do not remain very long with you, since I have to enact the part of master of the ceremonies to-night; but I shall come for you and Blanche when supper is ready."

"William," whispered Mrs. Gordon, "have you been lecturing Blanche again? she looks very serious."

"No, dear aunt; but I told her a secret which she is to reveal to yourself only, and that which made me feel very happy has rendered her sad; but now she is coming, and will tell you herself—so I must be off."

As Blanche resumed her seat, Mrs. Gordon inquired in a low tone what had caused her such anxious looks, when speaking with Beauchamp.

"Something which William has been telling me, dear aunt; but you must not divulge the secret. His father is now next heir to an earldom."

"Good Heavens! Blanche, you are joking!"

"No, aunt, indeed I am not;" and she then repeated Beauchamp's communication.

"And has this made you look so serious to-night, you silly child?" exclaimed Mrs. Gordon.

"Yes, dear aunt; I fear he may become a man of the world, and all my dreams of happiness with him, as my constant friend and companion, would then be at an end."

"My dear Blanche, do not worry yourself thus unnecessarily. William Beauchamp will never change—why should he more than Charles? you don't like him less because he is Lord Malcolm? or Constance either—nonsense, dear child, you ought to feel as happy as I do at this joyful news. Really, it has put me in such spirits, I think I shall have a dance with the old squire before the ball closes. Only think the surprise of Mrs. Harcourt when she hears my favourite announced some day as Lord Beauchamp. Oh, Blanche, this is indeed a delightful anticipation! how we shall triumph over that match-making pair! But, as William suggests, we will keep silence on this subject for the present; so now dance away, child, and look as happy and cheerful as you ought to feel."

Beauchamp's next partner was Selina Markham, whom he deemed it necessary to lecture on her behaviour to Mrs. Winterbottom.

"Don't lecture me, Will Beauchamp," exclaimed that self-willed young lady; "your reproofs to me are like water on a duck's back. I don't care a rap for them, and shall treat that odious woman as I please."

"Very well, Selina; if you are determined to raise up another enemy to our sport in the very centre of our best hunting country, pray do so. Conyers and myself cannot but feel greatly obliged by your kind interference. One such person as Lord Mervyn is quite enough in any country, without your conjuring up a new opponent, whom it is our policy to conciliate, now he has become a landed proprietor in our neighbourhood. We consulted Sir Lionel before inviting them here, and his opinion decided us, when you rush in like a firebrand to set us all in a blaze."

"Then, I suppose, Will Beauchamp, I must cry '*peccavi!*' and beg that vulgar woman's pardon."

"No, Selina; only spare her for the future."

"Very well, I will let her off as easy as possible on your account; and now tell me when you and Blanche are to be married, as since the trial, when you took her up in your arms and carried her out of court, every one says it is a settled thing; the affair with Hooknose created a suspicion, which your other act confirmed."

"Every one is wrong, then, Selina, for it is not a settled thing yet; and I can no more tell you when we are to be married than you can."

"Ah, Master Will, it's no use attempting to throw dust in *my* eyes, for Blanche tells by her looks what she will not confess with her lips; and that little affair with Lord Danby satisfied him, as well as myself, that you are the winner of the prize."

"Should that be the case, Selina, you will not be kept in the dark; but we are now talking of what never may and cannot happen for some time, knowing the Harcourts' love and esteem for your humble servant. But people say that you and Conyers are down on the list matrimonial—what say you, guilty or not guilty?"

"I shall not plead at all, Will, and keep you in the dark, as you do me."

"Well, Selina, curiosity is not one of my besetting sins; so I can afford to wait, and will only add, that, were I a woman, I should prefer Bob Conyers to every other man in the county—but here he comes—don't tell him, however, what I say, and I will go and hunt for Blanche, to stand your *vis-à-vis.*"

Beauchamp soon returned with his fair partner, now radiant with smiles and in high spirits, leaning on his arm in all the confidence of her deep and all-absorbing affection.

"Now, dear girl," he whispered, "you look again like my own dear Blanche," as her eyes met his with an expression of soft, unutterable love; "and don't ever doubt the power of fascination you possess to hold me for ever to your side."

"If you begin to flatter me, I shall begin to doubt *you* Mr. Will."

"Well, then, I will lecture you instead."

"No, William, I will listen to no lectures to-night."

"Then I will advise you that Selina has been trying to fish out of me all about our engagement, on which I have given her no information; so be on your guard, although she suspects how the case stands."

"But surely, William, you may now safely speak to Mr. Harcourt; he will not refuse the heir presumptive to an earldom."

"Me he would refuse, were I heir to a dukedom, under his present lacerated feelings, which must have time to subside; but we will consult Aunt Gordon on the subject, although my own impression is, that he will most decidedly refuse my proposals, and I fear, dear Blanche, that we must have a little more patience."

"For myself, I do not care," she replied; "but it vexes me to see you obliged to use subterfuge and evasion, which imply a doubt of my true feelings towards you, and place you in such a humiliating position."

"Talk not of humiliation, dear Blanche; you have made me one of the proudest men in existence, and you alone can humble me; for the rest, remember, 'the course of true love never did run smooth,' and I am content to suffer anything for you, so that I am sure of your love."

"Of that you ought to be doubly assured, since I have the prospect of becoming Lady Beauchamp. You are quite safe now, William, if not before—so don't feel jealous again," she replied with a laugh. "Now let us go and sit with Aunt Gordon until supper time, for I shall not dance again till I have had a glass of wine, and aunty says she shall drink the health of Lord and Lady Beauchamp in a bumper."

As Blanche and Beauchamp were approaching Mrs. Gordon, they observed the old squire and her in earnest conversation, evidently engrossed with each other.

"Stay, Blanche," whispered Beauchamp; "my governor looks as if he were making love to aunty; let us turn aside elsewhere."

"Oh, William, how can you talk such nonsense?"

"My dear girl, there is no nonsense in the case, but just the reverse; the squire considers your aunt perfection, and there we must both concede he is not far out in his reckoning. Well, then, what are they both to do, when Malcolm carries off Constance from Bampton, and I run away with you from the Priory? which I propose doing on the very first fitting opportunity, provided you don't give me the slip in London, and run away with some one else first. There will be an old solitary man in one house, and a (we must not say old) solitary lady in another.

Under these circumstances, as they both suit each other so exactly in disposition, temper, and habits (fox hunting excepted, and even so far I think the governor might get aunty into the kennel, although the whole household could not put her on horseback), as houses cannot be joined together, the next best thing to be thought of is to unite the owners—there would then be one house for the old, and the other for the young pair of birds."

"Oh, William! don't talk so foolishly; Aunt Gordon would never give up the Priory, and your father would never live anywhere but at Bampton; so your anticipations are very unlikely to be realised; but I suppose we must divide the year between them."

"No doubt, Blanche, that will be expected of us, as dutiful children, although Malcolm and Constance have promised to spend their winter at Bampton; still, I cannot help thinking the governor is bent on trying to persuade your aunt that Beauchamp is a prettier name than Gordon; and as she always will call me 'her dear boy,' my idea is, that the squire will assail her in this her weak point, and make me a *stepping*-stone to my promotion as her *step*-son. But, my gracious! Blanche, as Mrs. Winter says, don't *hallude* to this delicate *torpeck* with aunty, or I shall get my locks pulled and my ears boxed for my *imperance*. *Lorks*, my dear, just observe how serious they both look; depend upon it, the governor has popped the question."

"What possesses you to-night, William, I cannot conceive, to run on in this silly strain."

"Why, my dear, the fact is, like Mrs. Summertop, I'm rather *swipey*, I suspect."

"Then you are fit company only for that lady, William."

"Very well, my dear, if such is your opinion, I will go and make love to her daughter forthwith, as Aunt Gordon tells me I am a great favourite with the young lady. What say you to that proposition?"

"Oh, go, by all means, if you prefer her society to mine," replied Blanche, rather testily.

"That not being exactly the case, you naughty child, I shall keep your arm, and torment you until the supper hour; nevertheless, I am not *swipey*, although intoxicated with delight at seeing Lady Beauchamp, that is to be, in such buoyant spirits. That's all, my dear; so now we will just take a peep into the dining-room, and see how things are arranged for the supper."

Where we may leave the company to the enjoyment of the good things provided for them, and jump at once to the conclusion of the ball, when the old Squire of Bampton was joining with Mrs. Gordon in the last dance of the night—"Sir Roger de Coverley," as it has been generally called, though by some considered a misnomer.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The month of May, with its balmy breezes, had arrived, and Mrs. Gordon, with Blanche and Constance, were preparing to change their quiet, rational, rural enjoyments for the bustle and fever of London life, Lady Malcolm having insisted on all three taking up their abode with her, for the season, in her old family mansion in Grosvenor Square. The streets of London were not wholly unknown to Blanche Douglas, who had spent the two previous summers with Mrs. Harcourt, for the benefit of the first masters, to complete her education; but the gaieties, festivities, and places of amusement in the mighty Babylon had hitherto remained as a sealed picture-book, which was now to be opened to her expectant view, and already excited imagination.

A first season in London, to young girls generally, is, like the "Open Sesame" in the Arabian Nights, looked forward to with as much curious avidity as the opening of a Pandorean box, which is to display to view a perfect fairy scene, for enjoyment of the most exalted description; and it must be admitted that Blanche Douglas was not devoid of pleasurable anticipations from a visit to the gay metropolis, that pleasure being greatly enhanced by having her friend Constance as a participator in all her contemplated gaieties and amusements. There was one great drawback, however, acting as a drag on the wheels of her fancy, which otherwise might have run on without a check—the thought of leaving William Beauchamp (who had now become her second self) alone in the country. There was also another unpleasant reflection which would sometimes obtrude. Constance had invited Miss Honoria, at the ball, to stay a few days at Bampton; and that romantic young person having taken it into her head or heart to fall desperately in love with her brother (as a grateful return, I suppose, for his sister's kindness), had let fall certain hints in her confidential communications to Constance, which revealed the nature of her feelings towards William Beauchamp. Constance again, in joke, had warned Blanche of the danger to be apprehended from this formidable rival.

"Really, Blanche," she observed one day, "I don't like leaving William behind us, at the mercy of mother and daughter; for what with bags of money on one side, which are daily increasing in number, and such winning smiles, on the other, from the young lady, who has evidently made up her mind to have the young squire, whether he will or no, we are in what I call rather a disagreeable fix."

"Don't talk so absurdly, Constance," replied Blanche; "as if William would marry a brewer's daughter, to be saddled with such a vulgar mother-in-law, for a hundred thousand a year, instead of as many thousand pounds."

"I'm not afraid of his being tempted by money bags, my dear Blanche; but by the bewitching smiles of that little Siren Honoria, who, it must be confessed, sings and plays beautifully, and is much more highly accomplished than I had any conception of before her visit to Bampton."

"Then, Constance, his professions of love and attachment to me would be a hollow pretence," replied Blanche.

"Come, sister dear, don't take my jokes in earnest, and visit my raillery on poor, dear William's head, who, I believe, will ever prove as constant, and turn as true to Blanche Douglas, as the needle to the Pole. Don't fear, my love, that the wealth of Crœsus, or the beauty of Hebe, could shake William's loyalty; but you must ask him to join us in London, and that will be sufficient to ensure his presence."

The day before the breaking-up of the establishment at the Priory, Beauchamp rode over early and inflicted a long lecture on Blanche, which he deemed necessary previous to her first entrance on this new sphere, so surrounded with allurements and temptations.

"The routine of fashionable life in London, my dear girl," said he, "is comprehended in one word—dissipation. Night there is turned into day, and morning into night. You dine at eight o'clock in the evening, go at ten or eleven to balls and parties, which generally last till three or four o'clock in the morning; come home tired and fevered with the heat of the rooms, and retire to your roost when the birds have left theirs to warble forth their matutinal songs. Breakfast about eleven;

pay or receive visits from three to five, then take your ride or drive in the Park, and return home to dress for dinner about seven. This, with some little variation, is the usual every-day routine of life to those who move in the first circles of fashionable society. But there is one place of amusement, dear girl, although quite the fashion to patronise, which is a disgrace to any Christian country, and that is, without hesitation I say so, the Opera House. Against the singing and music of the Opera, which are, of course, of the very highest order, I have nothing to urge; but the after-piece, or ballet, is an exhibition from which every pure-minded woman must turn with shame and disgust; and I am quite sure that, if perforce obliged to witness one scene of this kind, you will never be induced to be present at another. Although I hope you may be safely trusted to Malcolm's or Aunt Gordon's care, who will protect you from witnessing all such objectionable exhibitions."

"And yet, dear William, without you I shall feel desolate and lonely; and you know, but for your promise of joining me in town, I would never have accepted Lady Malcolm's invitation. Tell me, then, when I may expect you there; and if you love, do not disappoint me."

"Will this day week, Blanche, satisfy you, giving time for a few arrangements which I must make before leaving home?"

"Yes, William, I will be content, if you cannot name an earlier day."

"If possible, dear girl, I will leave home sooner; but by this day week, if living and well, you shall see me at this hour in Grosvenor Square."

"Thank you, my own dear William, for your kind compliance with my wishes, which has made me quite happy; although I now sincerely wish I had never consented to leave the Priory, for I have no pleasure anywhere without you."

"For which pretty little complimentary speech, my love, I must reward you in my usual way. And now, recollect, I shall expect every day a true and particular account of all your thoughts and doings in London, until you are once more under my individual *espionnage*."

The promise being given, terminated the interview between the lovers; and Blanche returned to the house to complete her preparations for the morrow, Beauchamp having agreed to dine and sleep at the Priory that night, and see them off on their journey early the next morning.

Beauchamp, being of a very reflective and rather melancholy turn of mind, was sitting before dinner in an easy chair, with his face buried in his hands, absorbed in sad forebodings, a heavy sigh having just escaped his lips, when a gentle hand was laid upon his arm, and a sweet voice whispered in his ear—

"Dear William, what has caused that deep sigh?"

"The thought, my own precious child," said he, rising and clasping her to his heart, "of the many miles by which I shall be separated, this time to-morrow, from her I love so dearly; and the dread, which I cannot dispel, of that change which may be effected in your present pure feelings by dissipation and worldly influences. Many an innocent, chaste girl like yourself, hitherto cheerful, happy, and contented in her rural home, has, after a season in town, returned thither an altered being—peevish, fretful, unhappy, and discontented—longing again for the excitement of those scenes which have rendered her dissatisfied and miserable in domestic life."

"You think, then, William, that I have no self-control or strength of mind, but like a child shall be led astray and taken captive by the glittering allurements of the fashionable world?"

"Heaven grant, dear girl, that you may ever continue, as now, a child in simplicity of heart and thought; yet how few of the greatest and best of mankind, even the most favoured children of the Almighty, have been able to resist temptation in their hour of trial, or whose minds have not been affected by those follies and vices to which all human nature is so prone to yield? Lady Malcolm is, I fear, a votary of fashion; and when once engaged in that vortex of dissipation, of balls, routs, plays, operas, concerts, dinner-parties, &c. &c., your mind having become enervated or overstrained by unnatural excitement, you will find yourself imperceptibly gliding down that current which has carried thousands to destruction. Flattery also, which none can wholly withstand, will lend her aid to beguile and reconcile you to this new mode of life. Can you wonder, then, dear girl, that my thoughts are troubled at the risk you will incur when entering so young and inexperienced on these treacherous and deceptive scenes? Were you to be changed from that dear, artless, unaffected girl I now hold in my arms, into a flirting, heartless woman of fashion, the now bright dawning of my earthly happiness would sink into endless night. That dear form, too, although so beautiful, so enchanting to my enraptured vision, is but as the fair casket, containing a far more precious jewel within—a chaste and unsullied heart, which I value beyond all price. Oh, Blanche! that you may be restored to me as you now leave me, is my constant, anxious prayer."

"Dear, dear William, do not distress yourself by these forebodings of evil, or doubt my constant, unfailing love, which will strengthen and support me in every trial; and knowing how much your happiness depends on me, and is now confided to my keeping, rest assured that consideration alone would be sufficient, had I no stronger motives, to prevent that change you dread; but unless you are with me also, my fashionable career in London will be short indeed; and when you leave town, Aunt Gordon and myself have resolved to return to the Priory."

Malcolm entering the room at this moment, exclaimed—

"Ah, Beauchamp, at the old game again, lecturing Blanche, I conclude, from those tearful eyes. Really, my dear fellow, there is sometimes too much of a good thing; but all your advice will be thrown away after a month in town, by which time you will find this country lassie converted into an aerified town belle, receiving the homage of numerous slaves, attracted by her beauty and grace, with the dignity of a princess. You will get lectured yourself then, my boy, and ordered to the right-about in double quick time."

"Take care Constance does not serve you the same trick, Malcolm."

"Egad!" I should not be marvellously astonished if she did, Beauchamp, and therefore I shall keep a pretty sharp look out; but she shall have her run of gaiety—go everywhere, and see everything, for it is far better to have it over before we are married, and if so disposed to turn restive, the blow won't fall so heavily upon me now as it would later, when we are coupled together."

"You can do as you please with Constance, who is strong and able to take care of herself; but I must entreat, Malcolm, Blanche may not be dragged here, there, and everywhere, for her constitution will not endure much dissipation."

"Well, Beauchamp, then come up and take care yourself of the dear, precious little soul. Why, Blanche, he seems to think you are made of barley-sugar. What a life you will lead when married to such a fussy, prosy, particular old fellow. Take my advice, child, and marry some dashing, high-spirited young man about town."

"Who would try to kill me with dissipation, Charles, that he might spend my fortune on himself—that would be a *cannie* thing for a Scotchwoman to do. No, no, Charlie dear; I prefer being my old man's darling, to any gay young man's slave."

"Quite right, my prudent little cousin; and a precious darling you will be, no doubt, in his opinion. But now let us have dinner," ringing the bell; "Aunty and Con are uncommonly late, and I can wait no longer."

The dinner-hour passed heavily away, Lord Malcolm making ineffectual efforts to enliven the party; but nothing could rouse Beauchamp from his abstraction, and his sorrowful looks, fixed alternately on Blanche and Mrs. Gordon, infected them all.

"Confound your sour-crout visage," exclaimed Malcolm. "Why, Beauchamp, you are like a wet blanket in a frosty night—enough to congeal one's blood. Rouse, rouse yourself, my dear fellow; and here, Blanche, fill his glass, to our next merry meeting at the Priory."

"May that meeting find us all unchanged in hearts and feelings," exclaimed Beauchamp, impressively, as he placed his empty glass on the table.

"And Will Beauchamp," added Malcolm, gaily, "in a more lively humour. And now, aunty, with your leave, I will ring for another bottle of wine; or, by Jove! we shall find him suspended by the neck from the old chestnut tree on the lawn to-morrow morning—or stay—his razors—egad! aunt, you and Blanche had better take them away and hide them—no saying what he may do, now this blue fit is upon him."

"Do leave William alone, Charles," replied Mrs. Gordon.

"I dare not, aunty dear, until he has swallowed a bottle of wine, which may keep him from committing *felo-de-se* until to-morrow evening, when Miss Honoria Winterbottom will perhaps enliven him with her innocent prattle and sweet musical strains, or her ma' and the old squire may, all four, get comfortably merry together."

"Charles," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, rising to leave the room, "you are incorrigible—but remember, we must retire early to-night."

We will draw a veil over the parting scene between Blanche and Beauchamp the following morning, after which he handed her to the carriage in silence, not daring to trust his voice in a last farewell; and Blanche sunk back on the cushion to conceal her fast falling tears. When shaking hands with Mrs. Gordon, Constance, and Malcolm, the firm grasping of their hands in his proved, more than words could tell, what his feelings were, although utterance failed him from emotion, which, unable longer to control, he turned quickly away, and rushed towards the stables for his horse.

"There goes," said Malcolm, "a man whose deep feelings are almost, if not quite, a misery to himself; and I fear Will Beauchamp is more to be pitied than envied in the possession of too sensitive a heart."

"Oh, no, Charles," replied Mrs. Gordon; "it is that very profound depth and delicacy of feeling which has so endeared him to me since a boy, and made me love him as my own son."

"Ah, aunty dear, he is, I know, a paragon of perfection in your eyes; but notwithstanding his heart is in the right place, he is confoundedly jealous and haughty too; and I suspect we shall have a scene or two with him in town, if my sweet cousin there attracts many admirers."

"I do not wish to have any more admirers, Charles," replied Blanche; "and will take care never again to give William the slightest cause for uneasiness on that account."

"A noble resolution, my unsophisticated little pet; but, as a cat may look at a king, I conclude men may look at and admire Blanche Douglas without being thought very impertinent. But wait a little, my love; and, when you have been a month in London, you will think very differently on these matters."

"I hope never, Charles," was the reply, which being echoed by Mrs. Gordon and Constance, prevented Lord Malcolm from venturing any further remarks on the supposed fickleness of the fair sex.

CHAPTER XXX.

The hurry and excitement of travelling with four-post horses, and the ever-varying objects on the road, roused and diverted Blanche Douglas from giving unchecked indulgence to more gloomy thoughts; Mrs. Gordon using her best endeavours also to draw her attention to other things. But still, the unbidden tear would glisten in her eye, as she dwelt on her parting with him whom she loved far beyond every human being; and save when losing the kind instructress of her early years, this pang of separation from Beauchamp (although believing it to be of so short a duration) was the most bitter she had ever experienced. To her, Beauchamp had stood successively in the place of brother, friend, and lover. She had regarded him first with the affection of a sister; then esteemed him as a friend, and now loved him, with all the intensity of which her gentle, confiding nature was susceptible, as her affianced husband.

The shadows of evening were lengthening, as the heavy double-bodied carriage, containing the late inmates of the Priory, rattled through the streets of London, and drew up in Grosvenor Square. The door of Lady Malcolm's mansion was immediately thrown open by the expectant porter, and Malcolm leading the way to the drawing-room, was soon folded in his mother's arms, Mrs. Gordon, Blanche, and Constance following closely upon his footsteps, and each greeted in turn by a warm embrace and most cordial reception.

"Really, Margaret," exclaimed Lady Malcolm, "I could scarcely have recognised Blanche again, she is become such a tall, handsome, stately girl; well, I declare, my love," taking her hand in hers, and earnestly scanning her features, "you will create quite a sensation in the *beau monde*, and I shall feel justly proud of my *protégée*. But now, my dears, you must be greatly fatigued after your long journey, and I will show you your rooms. Dinner will be ready at eight o'clock precisely, and as we are quite *en famille* this evening, you need not bestow much time on your toilet."

Lady Malcolm being Mrs. Gordon's eldest sister, resembled her very much in personal appearance, and disposition also, although taller, and more fashionable in manners, from her constantly mixing in the first circles in London society; and it must be confessed, she was at heart rather a woman of the world, deriving her chief enjoyment from its gaieties.

Although much pleased with her niece's first appearance, she was in raptures when Blanche entered the drawing-room the second time, dressed for dinner.

"Why, my dear girl," she exclaimed, "you are really quite enchanting when divested of your travelling dress; I had no idea of that beautiful figure and graceful demeanour; you will be the belle of the season; and with your fortune and position, dukes and earls will be paying homage at your feet."

"Indeed, I hope not, Aunt Malcolm," replied Blanche, blushing deeply.

"And why not, my dear? it is nothing more than your due, and what I fully expect; so get rid of your country diffidence and blushes as soon as you possibly can, which here would only pass for *gaucherie* or *mauvaise honte*."

Constance in her turn elicited some very flattering encomiums from Lady Malcolm, exceedingly gratifying to her son, who replied, "Well, my dear mother, I think we may show our two girls against any two in London; but they must not be spoilt by too many compliments or too much indulgence, as we keep them pretty strict in the country—don't we, Aunt Gordon?—for fear of their running away."

"Oh, Charles," interposed Lady Malcolm, "you must give me a full account of all those dreadful proceedings with that *mauvais sujet*, Lord Vancourt. The maddest scheme I ever heard of; but he has always been a wild, reckless man, and living almost by his wits the last three or four seasons."

"It was a well-planned scheme, though, my dear mother, and Blanche had a narrow escape from being whipped off to the land of cakes; for had Will Beauchamp arrived ten minutes later, that villain would have had her safe enough in his travelling carriage."

"Well, Charles, you must tell me all particulars after dinner; and how are my friends, the old and young squires of Bampton, and Sir Lionel?"

"Well and hearty; and you may expect the honour of a visit from Will next week, who is coming up to town to look after us all, and prevent these girls being ruined by too much dissipation; as he does not consider a couple of aunts and one man cousin sufficient to keep them within proper bounds."

"I shall be delighted, Charles, to see my young friend again, as you know he has ever been a pet of mine."

"Yes, my dear mother, and since he has grown up a tall, good-looking young man, he has now become a pet of young as well as old ladies."

"Indeed, Charles, that is not at all an unlikely thing to occur; but who are the young ladies you allude to?"

"Oh!" replied Charles, carelessly, "there is a brewer's daughter, with a hundred and fifty thousand pounds, more or less, with her pa' and ma' hard at him; and one or two other demoiselles"—casting a significant look at Blanche, who blushed and trembled with apprehension—"I suspect, have set their caps at him; but two to one on Miss Winterbottom are the current odds at present."

"Miss *Who*, Charles?"

"Winterbottom, my lady mother—the great brewer's daughter."

"Goodness, what a name!" exclaimed Lady Malcolm in amazement.

"Yes; just fancy the electrical effect of such a name being passed up from flunkey to flunkey on one of our grand reception nights! why, my dear mother, the cry of 'the roof on fire' in a crowded theatre, would be nothing in comparison to the consternation created among your aristocratic friends by such an announcement, who would rush down-stairs without waiting for their carriages."

"Indeed, I could never receive such people in my house; but surely William Beauchamp does not seriously think of marrying this girl?"

"No saying, my dear mother; she is a pretty, fascinating, artful little hussy."

"Then, Charles, write directly, and ask him to come up without delay, as I know the very person to suit him, a rich young widow, just five-and-twenty, very handsome, agreeable, and pleasing in manners, with eight thousand a year at her own disposal; and Beauchamp is the very person she would fall in love with, as she dislikes her present set of admirers, all being too foppish or fashionable for her ideas of a husband; in fact she declared to me the other day, the character she would select would be a manly, unaffected person, of firm principles and unblemished reputation, whom she could respect as well as love."

"Well, then, Blanche, your old playmate, Will Beauchamp, is the very man to suit her—don't you think so, my dear?"

"I really cannot say, Charles," she replied, very shortly.

"At any rate, pray write to-morrow," resumed Lady Malcolm, "and save him from the brewery;—Beauchamp Winterbottom, and Co.! this would be dreadful."

"It shall be done, my dear mother, if you particularly desire it; but Will Beauchamp is a very obstinate, perverse young fellow; and if he has set his affections on Miss Honoria or any other young lady"—with a smile at Blanche—"all the widows in London won't turn him."

The announcement of dinner was a reprieve to poor Blanche, who dreaded lest her cousin's raillery might lead Lady Malcolm to suspect her attachment to Beauchamp, as the Harcourts, who had just arrived in London, would of course be frequent visitors at her house; and it had been resolved by Mrs. Gordon, before leaving the Priory, to keep her engagement a profound secret for the present—even from her own sister. Lord Malcolm, notwithstanding his love of fun and frolic, with which he could not forbear teasing Blanche occasionally, was too sincerely attached to her and Beauchamp to betray their position, even to his own mother; and although sometimes venturing within the precincts of the forbidden ground, yet he possessed sufficient tact to perceive how far he could advance without discovery, and made amends for any little *escapade* of this kind, by his unwavering determination to serve his friend in more important points.

The next day Lady Malcolm was "not at home to visitors," thinking that her sister would prefer one day's quietude after her journey; but she could not resist the temptation of taking Blanche and Constance for what is termed *an airing* (although generally proving a dusting) in the park, at the fashionable hour, when, from the multiplicity of carriages, anything beyond a walking pace is extremely problematical. The slow order of rotation in which the wheels move serves, however, in place of a *conversazione* for the equestrians who are seen lounging by the side of those wheels which contain anything like a pretty face, or a *partie* in other respects desirable, discussing the fashionable topics of the day. Numerous were the polite bows of recognition directed to Lady Malcolm by her aristocratic acquaintances on passing her carriage. But the two most pertinacious affixions to each side of the carriage were Lord Henry Bayntun (second son of the Duke of R——) and Sir John Martingale, a young sporting baronet of large fortune, both well known to Lord Malcolm, who being introduced to Blanche and Constance, maintained their position for some time to the exclusion of several others, equally attracted by the beauty of the fair occupants of Lady Malcolm's carriage, and hovering near in the hopes of an introduction.

Lord Henry having exhausted his fund of topics, generally considered so entertaining and interesting to young ladies, about the opera, balls, parties, reunions, receptions, and other gaities, *quocunque nomine gaudent*, and receiving very unsatisfactory replies from Blanche to his various inquiries as to meeting her at the Duchess of C——'s party on the 10th; the Countess of D——'s ball on the 12th; or Lady Mary W——'s grand concert at the Hanover Square Rooms on the 14th, he raised his hat and withdrew; being soon after joined by the baronet, who had likewise expended his stock of ammunition on Constance with little better success.

"Well, Bayntun," inquired Martingale, "what do you think of the heiress?"

"Nonplussed, my dear fellow—can't make her out; fine, handsome girl, with splendid eyes and beautiful complexion, that is all I know; but for conversation, whether from reserve or shyness, I could not get her to speak a dozen words."

"She don't fancy you, I suppose, Bayntun—not good-looking enough."

"Well, as to that, Martingale, I flatter myself that is not the reason, unless every mirror I look into is a false reflector. But how did you fare with Miss Beauchamp?"

"Oh, well enough whilst we conversed on country affairs, fox-hunting, riding, &c.; but we came to a dead stop at the very threshold of the Opera House; in short, these two girls are only just fresh up from the country; but we shall soon alter them to town paces and town faces also."

"Well, Martingale, I'm for the heiress, mind, who with her ten thousand a year would suit my book exactly."

"Ah, I dare say, Bayntun, and make up for that devilish bad book you made on the St. Leger of last year. That was a most untoward event, my dear fellow; and if you go often at that killing pace, ten thousand a year won't hold out with *you* very long. Moreover, Malcolm, although a capital fellow, is a *cannie* Scot at bottom, unco' sharp about the siller, and, depend upon it, he will take proper care that his cousin's money is made safe enough to herself before she marries."

"If I can win the young lady over to my side, Martingale, the odds against Malcolm are fifty to one; so I shall try my luck, at any rate."

As Lord Henry retired from Lady Malcolm's carriage, Lord Danby, who had been watching for the opportunity, drew up on the same side, and his sudden appearance caused the colour to rise on Blanche's cheeks, from the remembrance of their last parting at the Priory. The whole occurrences of that eventful day instantly rising to her mind, caused such a revulsion of feeling that her agitation became perceptible to Lady Malcolm, as she could scarcely at first reply to Lord Danby's salutation; but, soon recovering herself, she answered his several inquiries with such indifference and coolness as to convince him that the sentence she had been forced to pronounce was not likely to be reversed or re-considered. Danby, on witnessing her confusion at first and subsequent reserve, was almost puzzled how to interpret her reception of him; but, after several ineffectual attempts to draw her into conversation, he thought it more prudent to withdraw for the present; and Blanche, leaning back in the carriage, with her parasol before her face, resolved thereby to exclude any further advances from other attendant cavaliers. Lady Malcolm said—

"I fear, my dear girl, you have not yet recovered from your fatigue of yesterday; we will therefore return home. But how did you become acquainted with Lord Danby?"

"I was introduced to him first at the Hunt ball, Aunt Malcolm; and met him often afterwards whilst he was staying at Barton Court."

"Well, my dear, being heir to a rich dukedom, he is very much courted, and highly spoken of as a most agreeable, unaffected young man; and, of course, a most desirable acquaintance."

Blanche not appearing disposed to continue the conversation about Lord Danby, Constance interposed some other remarks to save her friend; and the carriage soon after set them down in Grosvenor Square.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Mrs. Gordon having her own carriage and horses in London, to prevent interference with her sister's arrangements, the two next days were chiefly devoted to calls on her particular friends, shopping, sight-seeing, &c., in which she was accompanied by Blanche and Constance, Lady Malcolm seldom going out until three or four o'clock in the afternoon. But her ladyship, after having conceded thus much to her sister, feelingly pardonably proud of her niece, and ignorant of her attachment to Beauchamp, now became anxious to exhibit her in public, as well as among her own aristocratic set—hoping and believing that Blanche would, from her personal charms and large fortune, soon have an opportunity of forming some splendid alliance.

The next night, therefore, found her sitting with Lady Malcolm in the front row of her opera box, towards which many inquisitive glances were directed from those on the opposite side of the house, many of whom were personally known to Lady Malcolm.

"Who can that be," inquired the Duchess of B—— of Lord Henry Bayntun, who had just entered her box, sitting with Lady Malcolm? She appears very young, and very pretty, although evidently new to London life, from her bashful and timid looks."

"That is Miss Douglas, your grace, Lady Malcolm's niece, who makes her first appearance to-night in the fashionable world."

"Oh, I remember now the name—the young lady whom Lord Vancourt attempted to run away with."

"The same," replied Lord Henry, "and, by all accounts, Vancourt made a very near thing of it."

"Pray lend me your glass a moment," exclaimed Lady Mary, the Duchess's eldest daughter (who had now entered on her fifth London season), "I really must have a thorough scrutiny of Danby's idol; for no one, in his opinion, can be compared to Miss Douglas—and there, I declare, is that foolish boy just entering their box."

"Well, Lady Mary, what is your opinion?" asked Lord Henry, "as I should think you must by this time have scanned her features sufficiently to know her again."

"Pretty, rather, though country-looking, with a superabundance of pink."

"Occasioned, perhaps," suggested Lord Henry, "by Danby's appearance; but look again—there is not too much vermilion now, or my vision is defective. She has fine eyes and handsome features, certainly."

"Oh—so, so," replied Lady Mary, rather contemptuously, returning the glass to her mother; "but Danby takes extraordinary fancies into his head about women."

Being offered a seat, Lord Danby remained some time in Lady Malcolm's box, conversing with the ladies, and occasionally addressing observations on the opera to Blanche, which were rather more courteously received than at their first meeting in the park. In fact, Blanche, reproaching herself, on reflection, for her very distant behaviour to him on that occasion, now relaxed into a more friendly mood, seeing her repulsion of him then had been noticed by her aunt, whose looks were the reverse of commendatory.

Ineffectual efforts were made by other loungers, who occasionally looked in, to obtain an introduction to the heiress; but

Lord Danby tenaciously holding his position, as a bar to all others approaching her, in whom he still took so deep an interest, remained oblivious of the lapse of time until the last act of the opera, when, apologising for his long intrusion, he reluctantly left the box.

When the curtain fell, Lady Malcolm expressed her intention to remain during the ballet also, and Blanche, remembering Beauchamp's remarks, rose from her seat, and making an excuse that the glare of the lights affected her eyes, Constance changed places with her, and she felt relieved on finding herself near Mrs. Gordon, who, equally displeased with the prospect of the coming exhibition, had vainly endeavoured to persuade her sister to leave the house before the ballet commenced.

"You are quite right, my love," whispered her aunt, "in withdrawing from that exposed position, although my sister and Charles laugh at our prudish ideas, as they call them, about the *danseuses.* For the future, I shall order my own carriage to be in waiting after the opera is over; but I did not wish, on our first appearance, to give offence to my sister."

As Taglioni flitted across the stage, throwing herself into her most graceful though not very modest attitude, Malcolm, delighting to tease his cousin, said, "There, Blanche, is not that quite perfection?" And now, as with a twirl she stood for a second on her toes, "Wouldn't you give a good deal to be able to astonish Will Beauchamp with such a feat as that?" or "Look now, that pirouette—my stars! how Beauchamp would stare to see his darling perform such an evolution!"

"I'm surprised at you, Charles," said Mrs. Gordon, "tormenting your cousin in this foolish manner."

"Oh, nonsense, aunty dear; Blanche will soon become accustomed to such sights, and then think nothing of them, as others do."

"Indeed, I shall not, Charles," replied Blanche, firmly, "and I hope never to witness another ballet."

Sir John Martingale now entering the box, Malcolm was diverted from further attacks on poor Blanche, who, leaning back against the side of the box, showed her fixed determination to withdraw her eyes from the stage, in which she was seconded by Mrs. Gordon, who began conversing with her on other subjects. Great was the relief to both when this indelicate performance ceased, and they were once more safe in the carriage, through all the draughts, hustlings, and bustlings consequent on the last falling of the curtain.

Although custom reconciles us to many strange sights, that is not the question to be considered, but the *first* effect produced on the mind of the beholder. What are our first impressions? These will be found generally to be our best guides in most cases. What, then, are the natural feelings of every modest girl on witnessing, for the first time, the ballet at the Opera House? Those of offended delicacy and disgust. The attitudes assumed by the dancers, and their indecent dress, are not only often inelegant, but perfectly revolting, For instance, what can be more absurd than the very favourite position of standing on one leg, with the other thrown out nearly at right angles with the body? (not to mention its horrible immodesty)—why, a swan or a goose performs this grand feat without any effort at all. By the general patronisers of the ballet, the same answer may be returned as by the girl skinning live eels—they are used to it. That is true enough of the ladies who can witness, apparently unmoved, such exhibitions night after night, although false as regards the eels. In fact, the *habituées* of the Opera House, after having undergone the operation of being flayed of the first outer soft cuticle of delicacy, lose or suppress all further feeling in the matter; at least, they pretend to great indifference or callousness, which, in the majority of cases, I fear, is not assumed, but really experienced. But the same cannot be said of the male portion of the spectators, who have no modesty at all, and on whose account principally this detestable exhibition is still fostered in a professedly Christian community; for my impression is decidedly that these immodest displays fan the flame of passion in men, and tend to keep alive those unhallowed desires which sensualists only will and do so freely indulge. To such the ballet at the Opera House is the grand attraction; and so long as it is countenanced by those ladies in the higher sphere of life who give the tone to fashion, so long will it continue a reflection on their own characters and a disgrace to a civilised nation. Can it be a matter for surprise that right-thinking Christian ministers inveigh so bitterly against theatrical exhibitions and balls, when their tendency is so palpably to debase and demoralise the minds of young persons of both sexes? Were plays divested of coarse jokes and *double entendres*, they would be restored to their primitive province, as a medium of instruction and amusement, instead of, as now, the means of corruption to youth; and of balls it may be said, there is nothing objectionable in our country dances or quadrilles; but the foreign introduction of waltzes and polkas, now so universally adopted, tends to great laxity of manners, and of morals also. Human nature is ever prone to evil, and needs no excitement to vice; the difficulty is to check these inclinations. But in the cases alluded to, as if natural passions were not strong enough and hard enough to subdue, additional incitements are added. Modesty is like the fresh bloom on a plum, which, when once rubbed off, never returns.

Blanche and Constance, when they had retired to their rooms at night, although delighted with the orchestra and the singing of Grisi and Lablache, could not repress their feelings of repugnance to the ballet, and Constance resolved to entreat Malcolm to spare them both the repetition of such a scene. The next night there was a ball at the Countess of Arnmore's, in the same square, for which Lady Malcolm, in anticipation of her niece's arrival in town, had accepted cards of invitation some time previously. Lady Arnmore being still young and handsome, although arrived at that time of life when ladies will not confess to their age, was one of the leaders of *haut ton*, and her parties, therefore, quite *recherchés*, which will account for her rooms being most inconveniently crowded on this occasion, so that the dancers had scarcely sufficient space to glide through the figures of a quadrille.

The first person to accost Blanche on her entering the room was Lord Danby, who engaged her for the first dance, and begged Lady Malcolm to allow him to introduce his mother, the Duchess of B——, to herself and Miss Douglas, which was, of course, gladly acceded to. Blanche's natural timidity was considerably increased on finding herself among a set of perfect strangers, and it must be confessed she would have gladly preferred being a looker-on instead of being looked at; but having no excuse to refuse Lord Danby, she was obliged, though most reluctantly, to take her place in the dance, and to be stared at and pulled to pieces by the other young ladies who entertained certain views of conquest over her highly favoured partner.

"Who is that timid-looking creature dancing with Danby?" asked Lady Fanny Trimmer of her partner, Lord Henry Bayntun.

"Miss Douglas, Lady Malcolm's niece, and an heiress with ten thousand a year."

"Oh, indeed! then Danby has turned fortune-hunter, I suppose?"

"I think not," was the reply. "His opinion on that point is pretty generally known, although he was sitting with her the whole of the opera in Lady Malcolm's box the other night."

"Well, I am surprised at his want of taste. What can he see to admire in a bashful, country-looking girl, without the semblance of fashion about her?"

"Danby is an odd fish," replied Lord Henry, "and takes odd fancies into his head, but I suspect is in earnest about this Scotch lassie, from having introduced her and her aunt to the Duchess the moment they entered the room this evening. Now you see, Fanny, between ourselves, this young lady's money would just suit a poor devil of a younger son like myself, and some people do say she was not an unwilling party to Lord Vancourt's attempted abduction, only that her cousin, Malcolm, for the credit of the family, took it up with a high hand. A few hints to your friend, Lady Mary, on this point won't lose their effect when repeated to the Duchess, and may serve us both."

"Thank you for the suggestion, Henry, which shall be acted upon without delay."

The other great attraction of the evening to the unmarried ladies was Lady Arnmore's brother, the rich and fastidious Marquis of Ayrshire, now in his thirty-fifth year, on whom the smiles of the fair sex had been hitherto completely thrown away. He was, although not handsome, most distinguished in appearance, and highly polished in manners, with a literary turn of mind. Being master of several languages, and having travelled over half the globe, he was well informed on most subjects, and in conversation most agreeable. Possessing, in addition to these recommendations, a princely fortune, he had been for the last two seasons a grand speculation in the higher circles. Although a great admirer of beauty, his requirements in other respects were so multifarious that it seemed almost impossible they could be realised in any one woman; still he was ever on the look-out for the person pictured in his mind's eye as the future Marchioness of Ayrshire, and it was his invariable custom to go the round of balls and parties of every description, in the hope of finding at last the being whom his fancy had portrayed. The form and features of every new *débutante* in the fashionable world were eagerly scanned, and if sufficiently attractive, an introduction was immediately obtained through some one of his numerous acquaintances. On this night, when, with glass to eye, he was taking a survey of the dancers, his attention was arrested by the modest looks, handsome features, and graceful movements of Blanche Douglas; and Lord Malcolm happening at that moment to be passing him, he asked, "Can you tell me, Malcolm, who that pretty, interesting young girl is, dancing with Danby? she is evidently new to London life."

"Yes," replied Malcolm, "she is my cousin, and this is her first appearance on the London boards."

"Well, I thought so, Malcolm, and all the better, in my opinion, on that account. Will you introduce me?"

"With pleasure, if we can work our way round to where she stands."

This being effected after some trouble, Malcolm presented Lord Ayrshire to Blanche, and he at once begged the honour of her hand for the next dance. This being granted, he remained standing near her until the quadrille was finished, when his arm was offered and accepted. Great was the dismay of Blanche when a waltz tune struck her ear, and her partner was proceeding to take up his position in the circle now quickly forming.

"I beg your pardon," she said; "but, instead of the next dance, I ought to have said the next quadrille, as I do not waltz."

"Surely you will not decline one or two turns to this enchanting air, Miss Douglas?"

"Yes, my lord," Blanche replied, firmly; "indeed I must, and shall be obliged if you will conduct me to my aunt, Lady Malcolm—or, as I see my cousin opposite, I can take his arm."

"Indeed, Miss Douglas, I will with great pleasure conduct you to Lady Malcolm, whom I have the honour of knowing."

On finding her aunt, she expressed her surprise at Blanche not joining in the dance, exclaiming, "Why, my dear, your country notions on this and some other points are rather too particular, and you really must give up these old-fashioned fancies."

"I hope not, dear aunt," was the quiet reply, as she sat down by her side.

"I am sorry to differ with your ladyship upon such an important point," added Lord Ayrshire, good-humouredly; "but I must applaud Miss Douglas's resolution to act as her own feelings dictate."

"What! teaching rebellion to my niece, Lord Ayrshire?" replied Lady Malcolm, laughing.

"Not that exactly, I hope; but as I assume to myself the right of acting according to my own opinions, I am liberal enough to concede the same privilege to others; and as Miss Douglas disapproves of the waltz, I must respect her judgment, although pronounced against myself."

"Then, albeit a decided waltzer yourself," rejoined Lady Malcolm, "you will not stand up in its defence?"

"Not absolutely, and I am not quite sure that I should select a waltzing young lady for my wife."

"Very consistent indeed, my lord, inducing young girls to act contrary to what you consider right, and then condemning them for yielding to your own persuasions."

"Or rather, you should say, Lady Malcolm, yielding to their own inclinations, for they are quite free to say yes or no."

Lord Ayrshire remained talking with Lady Malcolm and Blanche until the waltzers had ceased their gyrations, when he led her forth to take their places in the quadrille then forming; and from his having expressed opinions so congenial to her own, Blanche feeling more at ease in his company, her restraint and timidity gave way to greater cheerfulness and vivacity. Her partner, with the tact of a man of the world, succeeded without much difficulty in obtaining a tolerable insight into her character and disposition by the answers returned to his various questions, and he was as much charmed with her *naïveté* of mind, as he had at first sight been with her beauty and elegance of person. Lord Ayrshire's attentions to Miss Douglas did not fail to be noticed by Lord Henry Bayntun, and many others, which drew forth the remarks—

"Ah! there is Ayrshire, as usual, attaching himself to the new *débutante*, but no woman will ever come up to his requirements. Nothing short of an angel can possibly suit him—this will be a three nights' devotion, perhaps, and then the old story—too short or too tall—too good-looking or not good-looking enough—too clever or too stupid—too forward or too shy—in fact, that fellow never will be satisfied, and must remain a bachelor until he gets into his dotage, when he may finish his career of single blessedness by marrying his housekeeper."

"Nothing more likely," replied Sir John Martingale; "but I advise you to give Malcolm a hint not to allow Ayrshire to make a fool of his cousin."

"I think his attentions, knowing how they must end, will rather favour than retard my plans," said Lord Henry; "so let him have his head; mine must be now a waiting race, as there are two favourites before me."

From the overcrowded state of the rooms, the heat now became so oppressive to Blanche, that Lord Ayrshire, noticing her distress, remarked, "You are not yet, I see, accustomed to this tropical climate, Miss Douglas, which almost exceeds the temperature of India; and as a lady's fan is but a poor substitute for a puncha, I will conduct you to my sister's little bijou of a conservatory, where you will find relief from this melting atmosphere, although few are ever admitted into her sanctum, for fear of her choice collection of plants and flowers being injured or plucked." Blanche was glad to escape almost anywhere from such crowded rooms, being quite overcome, and ready to faint from the excessive heat; and Lord Ayrshire, having led her by a private door into this comparatively Elysian retreat, placed his sister's easy chair before her, saying he would return directly with some refreshments; and he soon reappeared, followed by a servant bearing ices and cooling beverages, which being placed on a small table, the man withdrew.

Blanche having expressed her thanks to Lord Ayrshire for his polite attentions, and feeling now renovated by a glass of wine and water, rose to leave the conservatory.

"There is no necessity for your hurrying away so quickly, unless you prefer dancing in that hot room to this cool retreat."

"I do not intend dancing again to-night," replied Blanche, "having suffered already so much from the heat, to which I am not yet inured. But Lady Malcolm will wonder what has become of me."

"Oh, do not trouble yourself on her account. Chaperons do not expect to see much of their charges, when dancing has once commenced; but should your absence be noticed, Lady Malcolm, I am quite sure, will feel obliged, instead of displeased, at my having saved you from fainting."

Thus pressed, Blanche consented to remain a few minutes longer, Lord Ayrshire directing her attention to the choice and rare collection of plants with which they were surrounded; and thus occupied, and with his agreeable conversation, the time passed away rapidly; and half an hour had nearly elapsed, when Blanche, hearing the carriages arriving, expressed her desire to join her aunt without delay, which was of course complied with.

Lady Malcolm's carriage had just been announced, when

Blanche returned to her aunt, who at first appeared much displeased, Malcolm having searched for her in vain through the rooms; but she was pacified by Lord Ayrshire's explanations, and accepted his arm down-stairs.

Malcolm rallied Blanche, when they reached home, on the easy conquest she had achieved over the hitherto obdurate heart of Lord Ayrshire.

"Why, my dear, you are as irresistible as Cæsar, who, with his *veni, vidi, vici*, came and conquered the world by the sound of his name. You are a second Circe, and have changed this man of stone into a fawning devotee by the wand of your enchantment. All the Lady Marys and Lady Fannys in the room were mad enough to scratch your eyes out, my love; and the men declared they had never seen Ayrshire so thoroughly spell-bound before."

"Charles, how can you talk such absurd nonsense!"

"Facts, my dear—facts, I assure you, 'pon rep, as Markham says."

"I must caution Blanche, notwithstanding," interposed Lady Malcolm, "from trusting too much to the marquis's attentions, who, although very agreeable, and a most desirable *parti*, has become quite notorious for his flirting propensities with every young girl on her first appearance. In short, he is a mere butterfly, flitting round every fresh opening flower, without intending anything further."

"Thank you, dear aunt, for your friendly warning," replied Blanche, "although I am not aware of having given Lord Ayrshire the slightest encouragement."

"What will be said, and what was said, of a Miss Douglas withdrawing from the company and sitting for half an hour with Lord Ayrshire alone in his sister's boudoir? D'ye call *that* nothing, by way of encouraging a man's addresses?" asked Malcolm, jestingly. "Why, I overheard Lady Fanny Trimmer exclaiming loud enough to be heard by half the room, 'Only think of that demure, bashful-looking girl playing the flirt already with Ayrshire, shut up together half the night in Lady Arnmore's sanctum!' People will talk, Blanche, and this story will be circulated through her ladyship's extensive circle of acquaintances before this time to-morrow night, and lose nothing by carrying."

"Indeed, Charles, I could not have been there more than twenty minutes, if so long; but feeling ready to faint from the excessive heat, I accepted Lord Ayrshire's offer of taking me for air to what he called his sister's conservatory, and I am surprised and mortified to hear such a trifle magnified into a serious offence. For the future, however, I will take care no one shall again accuse me of being a flirt."

"That's right, my love—spoken like a Douglas," replied Malcolm; "so now, good night;" but on opening the door he whispered, "What will Beauchamp think of this story, which he certainly will hear as soon as he arrives?"

"I will tell him myself," she replied, "the moment I see him."

"The best thing you can do, dear girl; so now think no more about it."

CHAPTER XXXII.

Blanche, however, did think a great deal more about it, and it worried her so incessantly, that sleep was courted in vain that night, or rather morning; and feeling restless, she rose early, and went down into the breakfast-room for a cup of tea. Beauchamp had arrived in London the previous night, and having breakfasted early, walked to Grosvenor Square, to give his friends a surprise.

"Any one up yet in the house?" he inquired, on gaining admittance.

"Only Miss Douglas, I believe, sir, in the breakfast-room. What name shall I say, sir?"

"Beauchamp;" with which he was ushered into Blanche's presence, who, springing from her chair, rushed to meet him, exclaiming, "Oh, William! what a joyful surprise," holding out her hand; but the moment the door was closed she was pressed to his heart in a long and fervent embrace.

"You look flushed and excited, my dearest girl, this morning," Beauchamp remarked, after he had been sitting with her a few minutes. "What is the cause of it?"

"A sleepless night and bad headache, from an overcrowded party at Lady Arnmore's."

"And nothing more?" inquired Beauchamp, noticing her heightened colour and averted looks.

"Yes, dear William, there is something more; I have been excessively annoyed and mortified by a trifling occurrence which took place there;" and she then frankly related what had happened, with Malcolm's remarks, and her own deep regret for having one moment left the ball-room; "although," she added, "I feel convinced, dear William, I could not have been absent longer than twenty minutes."

"My own dear Blanche, do not worry yourself another moment on this account. There is nothing very particular, that I can see, in your wishing to escape for a few minutes from such a furnace into a cooler atmosphere; and had you not done so, a scene might have ensued from your fainting."

"Dear, dear William, I am so glad you are not displeased and take my part—for all others I do not care, let them say what they please."

At this moment Aunt Gordon made her appearance, and Beauchamp, rising to meet her, was met by a warm salute on his cheek.

"My dear boy! I am so overjoyed to see you that I cannot refrain from giving you a kiss. You are not jealous, Blanche, I hope. Now sit down, William, whilst I make the tea, and tell me all the country news—first of your father, and then our other old friends."

As Beauchamp was proceeding in his relation, Malcolm entered the room, exclaiming, "Oh, my prophetic soul! Will Beauchamp, I declare! Well, old fellow," shaking him warmly by the hand, "I was dreaming of you and the governor last night; we had just pulled down our fox in the open, after a burster of forty minutes, when in getting off my horse to save the brush, I found myself getting out of bed! So here you are at last, just in time, my boy, as Blanche is, as usual, getting into all kinds of scrapes, and another runaway match already on the tapis."

"I have heard all about it, Malcolm, and don't think she is much to be blamed in this matter."

"Ah! a cannie chield—there is nothing like having the first word, and telling one's own story, Beauchamp; but now—how is the governor?"

"Hale and well, with serious intention of coming up to town next week."

"Hurrah!" shouted Malcolm; "he'll be the lion of the season, with his leathers and tops, for no one can persuade him to leave them off, I suppose."

"Not until dinner-time, certainly," replied Beauchamp. "Well, old fellow, where are you holding out?"

"At Long's Hotel, and my horses will be up to-morrow night."

"All right, my boy—now we shall have some fun—and here comes Con," who threw herself into her brother's arms in an ecstacy of delight.

"There, Beauchamp, let that do for the present, so much kissing makes my mouth water; but your sister shall have one for tempting me;" which was accordingly inflicted without much resistance. A good hour having been spent at the breakfast table, Beauchamp asked what was the order of the day.

"None issued yet," replied Malcolm, "as my Lady Mither seldom honours us before twelve."

"Then I propose, aunt," said Beauchamp, "if you do not object, taking these girls a stroll in Kensington Gardens; they both look in want of a little fresh air."

"Go, by all means, William, and I will order the carriage directly."

"I think a walk there will be of greater benefit this fine morning, aunt."

"Oh, yes!" rejoined Blanche, "do let us walk."

"Very well, my dear; then I will call for you in the carriage, at the entrance on the Bayswater Road, about one o'clock."

The young ladies were not long in making their preparations, and, escorted by their beaux, left the square in high spirits.

"Well, dear Blanche," asked Beauchamp, "how do you think you will like a London life?"

"Not at all, William, if I must judge by first impressions, and those, you say, are generally right."

"Yes, dear girl, they are so, in my opinion, of many things, particularly as to London life, which requires considerable schooling for one like yourself to appreciate or understand; moreover, you must be thoroughly acclimatised before you can enjoy it, if enjoy it you ever can, which I sincerely hope you never will. For instance, last night you could not enjoy a dance, because not inured to the excessive heat of these London rooms, which has little or no effect upon those accustomed to it. But this training to endure an unhealthy atmosphere will cost you the loss of that youthful bloom now mantling in your cheek, which no art can ever replace; and your participation in that constant succession of frivolous amusement, which so many make the business of their lives, will be at the expense of your own peace of mind. When once involved in the giddy vortex of London dissipation, you will irresistibly be borne away in its attractive whirl, engaged in a perpetual round of balls, dinner-parties, operas, &c., with neither time nor inclination then, perhaps, for reflection. Oh! what a state of existence, dear Blanche, for rational and immortal beings, in fruitless, senseless pursuit of a phantom, which is ever eluding their grasp, expending recklessly the freshness and strength of their youthful minds and bodies on pleasures (if they can be called such) which will entail upon them hereafter bitterness and reproach."

"Oh, my dear William, do not believe your own Blanche can ever forget so far her duty to God or to you, as to become a reckless votary of fashion; indeed, I have in this short time seen enough of London life to know and feel it will never suit me, and I shall be only too happy to return to the Priory."

"There ought to be moderation in all our recreations and amusements, dear girl, and there can be no great harm in your seeing a little of the gay world, now you are here."

"Without you, dear William, I have no enjoyment anywhere—but your presence gives me confidence; and already I feel quite a different being to what I have been since my arrival here."

"Well, lecture number one having lasted quite long enough, we will join Constance and Malcolm."

"Now, Beauchamp," exclaimed the latter; "we will sit down on this bench, and you must tell us all about Mrs. *Summertop* and Miss Honoria. Has the young lady proposed yet? as Blanche is exceedingly anxious to know."

"They propose a visit to London, Malcolm, which I have tried ineffectually to ward off; for Mrs. Winter, having heard that Blanche and Constance are to be presented at the first drawing-room, has taken it into her head that her daughter must be presented also; and, I am grieved to add, she has engaged a house in Albemarle Street, to be near her friends (as she calls us) in Grosvenor Square."

"The deuce she has!" cried Malcolm. "What fun! But not a word of this to her ladyship, Beauchamp. Just imagine my lady mother's astonishment on hearing Mrs. and Miss Winterbottom announced."

"It is very provoking," remarked Constance, "and all the blame will be laid on me, for inviting Miss Honoria to Bampton."

"Never mind, my dear," replied Malcolm; "it will be as good as a comedy. I only hope I may be at home when she calls. My gracious! what a scene it will be!"

"Really," said Blanche, "I must tell Aunt Gordon to prevent her calling, or Lady Malcolm will be seriously offended with us all."

"You shall do no such thing, Miss Marplot," returned Malcolm; "or I'll pay you off, Blanche, and peach about something else—don't you or Constance give a hint even to aunty."

"Very well, I suppose we must submit; but now I think the carriage will be waiting for us."

After handing the ladies in, Malcolm walked home with Beauchamp across the park, who was most kindly received by his mother, with a general invitation to her house. Soon after luncheon visitors began calling, and the Marquis of Ayrshire was announced, who, from the occurrences of the previous night, entertained the idea of having made a favourable impression on Blanche, and appeared rather disconcerted by her distant behaviour to him. His lordship's polite inquiries were met with brief, though courteous replies; and, as her attention was so much occupied with Beauchamp, who was sitting near her, he very soon made his *congé*, muttering, as he went down stairs—

"Ah! some fox-hunting cousin, I suppose, fresh from the country, with all the parish news!"

The gay young widow, Mrs. Egerton Fortescue, was next announced, and received by Lady Malcolm in the most friendly manner, and introduced by her to Blanche, Constance, and Beauchamp. She had married very early in life (being taken almost from the school-room to the altar), at her mother's instigation, Mr. Fortescue, a gentleman of large fortune in the north of England, although old enough to be her grandfather; but having made him a most dutiful and attentive wife, during the five years they lived together, he had bequeathed to her his whole fortune, on his decease, unfettered and uncontrolled. Mrs. Fortescue, although not strikingly handsome, was decidedly pretty and extremely fascinating; and there was a sweetness in her smile, and gracefulness in her manner, with a total absence of all affectation, which rendered her particularly interesting and attractive. She had now, although a widow, only attained her twenty-second year; and, through her late husband's connections, had obtained a good introduction amongst the aristocracy.

Constance took a great fancy to the young widow; but Blanche, recollecting Lady Malcolm's observations on a former occasion, felt far from happy in her company, regarding her admiring glances towards Beauchamp as prognostic of more serious intentions; and she was becoming nervous and restless, when Mrs. Fortescue, having chatted most agreeably for nearly an hour on the various topics of the day, rose to take her leave.

"Well, Mr. William," asked Lady Malcolm, "what do you think of the young widow?"

"Lady-like, rather pretty, and very pleasing, with the art, peculiar to some ladies, of saying a great deal in a very pleasant way about nothing; in other words, a very amusing, chatty little person."

Blanche breathed more freely.

"And is this all you have to say of this most charming, fascinating creature, to obtain from whom one approving smile, such as she bestowed on you, half the young men in London would feel extremely flattered? Indeed, Mr. William, I am quite surprised at your want of taste," continued Lady Malcolm; "but you will think *her more* than pretty, when you hear she has about eight thousand a year at her own disposal, which, with a little attention, might become yours; for, knowing her sentiments on marriage, you are precisely the person to suit her."

"Really, Lady Malcolm, I shall become disagreeably vain if you pay me such compliments; but I think there is little prospect of my becoming a convert to your opinions respecting this charming young widow; every man has his peculiar fancy, and ten or twenty thousand a year would not render her a whit more pretty in my eyes than she is at present."

"You will think differently when you become better acquainted," replied Lady Malcolm. "And now, my dears," addressing Blanche and Constance, "we will take our drive in the park."

"And we will join you there on horseback, my dear mother," said Malcolm, "to keep off the bees and butterflies. So come along, Beauchamp," as running down-stairs he sung:—

"For she is a charming woman,
And he's a most fortunate man."

"Egad, you're in for it, old fellow, and booked for the widow, *nolens volens*."

The afternoon being fine, there was a grand display of gorgeous equipages in Hyde Park; and it must be admitted that in no city of the world can there be seen such beautiful women and splendid horses as in the metropolis of England during the fashionable season. As Malcolm and Beauchamp rode leisurely along, they recognised many acquaintances from the country—Lady Markham, the Comptons, Rollestons, and others; and, on rounding the corner into Rotten Row, came nearly into collision with the Captain, who exclaimed—

"Eh, Beauchamp, 'pon honour—nearly unhorsed me, old fellow—blind with dust—such a crush—ah! Malcolm—how do?—just passed the ladies—couldn't get near—Ayrshire, Danby, and lots of swells in close attendance—met the Harcourts—everybody in town—Barnet, Gwynne, Melville, and even Bob Conyers."

Leaving the Captain, Malcolm and Beauchamp essayed in vain to reach the side of the carriage which contained their treasures.

"Hopeless attempting it now," remarked Malcolm. "That fellow, Ayrshire, sticks like a leech to every pretty new face which takes his fancy. The harder the conquest, the more he perseveres. Blanche's coolness this morning has put him on his mettle."

"If that is his game, Malcolm, the probability is, that he will put me on *my* mettle—and very soon, too."

"No, no, Beauchamp—let us have no more scenes—you must take things quietly, as I do. Moreover, women don't like their lovers to be tied to their apron-strings morning, noon, and night, to the exclusion of all other men; and, you know, a good-tempered horse won't bear to be ridden on the curb continually—it frets and galls the most tractable. So bear in mind, that if you are perpetually lecturing and hectoring Blanche, she will, much as she loves you now, be disgusted—and remember the trite old verse—

'Be to her virtues ever kind;
And to her faults a little blind;
And put the padlock on your mind.'

Even your hounds would not fly to and love you as they do, were they to be met with rating and the whip, instead of endearment and caresses."

"Yet the young hounds I am obliged to rate and correct sometimes, Malcolm, when they are doing wrong, and they do not love me the less for it. But now, I tell you frankly, after having given Blanche every caution I thought necessary on her entering this new sphere of life, she is quite free to follow her own course, without further lectures or interference from me."

"I am glad to hear such a determination on your part, Beauchamp—teach her to fly to you as a refuge and comforter from annoyances or troubles of any kind; and you are secure of her confidence and affection."

"That is my intention, Malcolm, henceforth; I have only treated her as I would a dear young friend, when being first thrown on the world, by giving her my best advice; firmly believing she has sufficient good sense to appreciate my true motives. Beyond this, you know she will never be fettered by me; and I repeat, what I have before told you, that if, on mixing more in society, she can find any man she prefers to myself, no word of reproach or remonstrance shall ever escape my lips. Lady Malcolm and yourself, under whose protection she now is, must decide whether the person she may select is in all respects, not in rank and fortune only, but in character and disposition also, calculated to make her happy."

"Come, come, Beauchamp, don't be riding the high horse again; you are always too soon up in your stirrups; but you ought to know, if you do not already, my true feeling in regard to yourself; so now, my dear fellow, let us say no more on this subject, which is always a ticklish one with you."

"To be accused of *hectoring* your cousin, Malcolm, is not very palatable; as such an intention has never entered into my head."

"Then I recall the offensive expression, Beauchamp; but what I meant was this: that as Blanche *has already*, from remarks I heard at Lady Arnmore's ball, created rather a sensation in the *beau monde* (at which I am not the least surprised, from her extreme loveliness), a little enhanced, no doubt, by the other considerations of fortune and position, you must not be too captious about her receiving that homage which is her due. All women at heart are, I believe, fond of admiration, and, depend upon it, Ayrshire will only stand as one of a rather long list of admirers after her presentation at court. There is one other point I must allude to: my mother is exceedingly fond of the opera; and as Blanche is living under her protection, I should recommend your not volunteering an exposition of your peculiar ideas with regard to the ballet, which at present happens to be the fashion."

"My opinion with regard to the ballet, or any other objectionable place of amusement, when called forth, shall never be suppressed, Malcolm, even in the presence of royalty. But as to my attempting to interfere with Lady Malcolm's recreations, or obtrude my convictions upon her ladyship, that would be the height of presumption."

"Come, Beauchamp, a truce to further parley on this unpleasant topic; I see the carriage approaching, and it is our turn now to take the places of Ayrshire and Bayntun."

"Excuse me, Malcolm, from attempting to obtrude myself into the place of one who appears to have Lady Malcolm's sanction for so pertinaciously adhering to her carriage; and, as I have letters to write, I will leave your horse at the stables;" with which Beauchamp turned short round and left him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The dinner hour had nearly arrived, and Mrs. Gordon, Malcolm, Blanche, and Constance were dressed, and sitting in the drawing-room, when the former exclaimed, "What has become of William, Charles? he dines here to-day, I conclude, and is always very punctual."

"Perhaps my mother omitted to give him a special invitation for this evening," replied Malcolm.

"Nonsense, Charles; he would not stand upon such ceremony."

"Then, I fear, you will not see him to-night at all, aunt, as I happened, when speaking to him, in our ride to-day, about his so continually lecturing Blanche, which I don't approve of, now she is under my mother's roof and launched on the gay world of fashion, to let fall the word *hectoring*, at which he immediately took fire."

"It was a harsh term, Charles, and not, in my opinion, at all applicable to William Beauchamp's friendly advice to Blanche, which is the reverse of dictatorial; but has he ever ventured to accuse you of *hectoring* it, as you say, over Constance?"

"No, aunt, certainly not; nor has he ever in any way interfered with me, although I think Constance will acquit me of pestering her with unnecessary advice, or imposing restrictions upon her time or actions."

"Still, Charles," said Constance, "you have your own peculiar fancies about some things, as well as my brother."

"Oh, no doubt, my dear girl, we have all our little failings of temper and prejudice," replied Malcolm; "and I confess to being ruffled occasionally, as well as others."

"Then I think," added Mrs. Gordon, "you should make some allowance for your friend, who, I am convinced, always speaks and acts from the most pure and honourable motives."

Lady Malcolm entered the room at this moment, and expressed her surprise at not seeing Beauchamp, it being now five minutes past the dinner time.

"Shall we wait another quarter of an hour?" she asked of her son.

"I do not believe Beauchamp intends dining here to-night," was the reply; "as neither your ladyship nor myself asked him for this particular day."

"I was not aware that William Beauchamp had become a person of such formality and consequence."

"Neither has he," added Mrs. Gordon.

"Then what can be the cause of his absence?" inquired Lady Malcolm.

"*Me me adsum qui fui*," cried Malcolm; "I am the offender —we had a little altercation in the Park about young ladies witnessing the ballet, which Beauchamp does not approve; and venturing to hint that, as my lady mother was rather partial to that exhibition, his opinions on that point had better be suppressed in your ladyship's presence, he said the expression of his sentiments, when called forth, should never be smothered, even in the presence of royalty itself. Something more was said by me about his old-fashioned ideas, when he turned short round, saying he had letters to write; since which I have not seen him."

"I applaud William Beauchamp," said Mrs. Gordon, "for his manly, uncompromising defence of what he believes right; and much as I love him for his kind, affectionate disposition, I respect him still more for his firm and virtuous principles."

"To which I give assent, Aunt Gordon; so now, my dear mother, let us have dinner; and I will take a polite note of invitation to his hotel for to-morrow."

Immediately after breakfast, the next morning, Mrs. Gordon ordered her carriage, and called upon Beauchamp, whom she found busily engaged in writing a long letter, which, on entering his room, he was hastily putting aside with evident looks of confusion. Rising and welcoming Mrs. Gordon in the most affectionate manner, Beauchamp expressed the honour he felt conferred upon him by the visit, and was entering on other subjects, when Mrs. Gordon interrupted him.

"To whom are you addressing the letter you were in such haste to conceal, William?"

"What a question, dear aunt! Must I tell you the names of all my numerous correspondents?"

"No, William; but I am particularly curious about that individual letter."

Beauchamp hesitated, and endeavoured to evade giving a reply; but Mrs. Gordon, keeping to her point, and feeling annoyed at his refusal to answer her inquiry, at last rose, saying, "It is time for me to go, having lost your confidence, William."

"No, dear aunt, that you never have; here is the letter," placing it in her hand.

"Thank you, William, I see it is intended for myself, which I from the first suspected;" and having read the contents, she said—"So you purposed punishing poor me and Blanche by leaving us so abruptly, merely on account of your difference with Malcolm yesterday?"

"I will tell you all that passed between us, dear aunt, and then you will judge whether I could feel quite at home with Lady Malcolm or himself, unless I submit to be considered a nonentity."

After hearing his recital, Mrs. Gordon said, "Charles has expressed his deep regret at having offended you by his unguarded expression; and as I and Blanche have been looking forward to your arrival in town with so much delight, you will not, I hope, allow this trifling affair to deprive us of the pleasure of your company. In short, my dear boy, our chief enjoyment will be at an end, if you leave us."

"There needs no other inducement for me to remain, dear aunt, if I can contribute in any way to your happiness; but I shall not avail myself of Lady Malcolm's general invitation to her house."

"As you please, William; but I wish you to call on my sister this morning, as she is not a little vexed with Charles because you did not dine with her yesterday; so put away your writing materials, and come with me."

Lady Malcolm received Beauchamp rather formally at first, saying she had expected him at dinner the evening before.

"I was not honoured with an invitation to your ladyship's table yesterday, that I am aware of," replied Beauchamp, very quietly.

"I gave you a general invitation, Mr. Beauchamp, and I meant that to include breakfast, luncheon, and dinner, every day in the week, when not engaged myself from home, as long as you remain in town."

"I feel deeply indebted for your ladyship's most friendly offer of hospitality, although I cannot think of obtruding myself so unceremoniously, when my place at your table might be required for some distinguished guest."

"Very well, Mr. William, then you will place me under the necessity of writing a formal note every morning to request the honour of Mr. Beauchamp's company at dinner. So you do not approve of young ladies remaining to see the ballet, it seems, by what Charles has told me?"

"Certainly not, Lady Malcolm," was the quiet though firm response.

"Will you state your reasons for holding this opinion?"

"With pleasure, to Lady Malcolm when alone, and I believe I may trust to her impartial judgment to decide whether they are intrinsically right or wrong, without regard to fashion or the world's verdict. 'Those who think seriously will not follow a multitude to do evil.'"

"Well, Mr. William, I believe I never have thought as seriously on this subject, or perhaps on many others, as I ought; but I respect your scruples and honour your principles; and you have my promise that your sister and Blanche shall never again be condemned by me to witness another ballet; will that satisfy you?"

"Yes, indeed, dear Lady Malcolm," rising and taking her hand; "I do indeed thank you for this kind concession."

"Then now, you foolish boy, will you make my house your home?"

"As far as I consistently can, with the greatest pleasure."

"You will dine with us to-day, then, to begin?" to which a most willing assent was given. Malcolm now burst into the room, exclaiming, "Why, Beauchamp, they told me at Long's you were about to leave town immediately; how is this, old fellow?" offering his hand; "surely you are not so mortally offended with me as to leave us again in this abrupt manner? On my word, Beauchamp, I did not intend to wound your feelings by anything I said yesterday in the Park."

"No man, who acts from upright, conscientious principles, likes to hear his motives questioned, or his opinions ridiculed. It has ever been my rule to speak and act according to the impulse of my own mind, without wishing to dictate to others; but as you appeared to imply yesterday that any expression of my very peculiar ideas would prove distasteful to Lady Malcolm and yourself, you could not be surprised at my choosing the lesser evil of returning home, instead of hazarding an unpleasant collision with those I esteem so highly."

"By Jove! Beauchamp, the pride of all the Malcolms and Douglases who have ever existed is nothing when compared with yours."

"Call it not pride, but proper spirit, Malcolm, to resist the influence of that thraldom which fashion and folly would impose. I don't come to London to borrow the airs or brains of fops and dandies, whose chief occupation is in dangling after carriages in Rotten Row."

"No, by Jove! old fellow, that's clear enough, for you looked inclined to commence a general horse-whipping yesterday, particularly upon Ayrshire, for lounging with his hand on the window-sill of my lady's carriage."

"There, Malcolm, he was quite safe from any interference of mine; but if he is, as you tell me, notorious for trying to make fools of all unsuspecting young girls, I shall give him to understand, on the first fitting occasion, that my sister is not to be included in their number, and perhaps you may give him the same hint as regards your cousin. A man of his character, singling out any young girl as the object of his very particular attentions, merely to make her pander to his vain appetite for conquest, without any serious intentions, is in my opinion deserving censure, if nothing stronger."

"You are quite right, Beauchamp, and I shall certainly give Ayrshire a quiet hint on this subject, which will be quite sufficient; so now come with me to Tattersall's for an hour, and after lunch we will be at the command of the ladies."

On turning into the yard, they encountered Lord Ayrshire, with whom Malcolm shook hands, and taking him aside said, "You will excuse the privilege of an old acquaintance, Ayrshire; but of the two young ladies you were so closely besieging in my mother's carriage yesterday, one is, as I believe you are aware, my cousin, and the other the sister of my friend Beauchamp, standing opposite, who is rather particular about such things, as well as myself."

"Oh! I understand, Malcolm; you think, I suppose, I am playing the old game; but, on my word, my dear fellow, I am positively in raptures with your cousin, and never felt so serious in my life."

"Then take my advice, Ayrshire, and go no further, for your attentions will be thrown away."

"How so, Malcolm?"

"Simply because I believe her affections are engaged elsewhere."

"Is Danby, then, the happy man?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Who is, then, Malcolm?"

"I can afford you no further information, Ayrshire; so good morning. A word to a wise man is enough."

"But not enough for me," muttered the Marquis, as he walked thoughtfully out of the yard. "It is evident Malcolm does not favour my pretensions to his cousin—thinks I am not in earnest, perhaps; but I shall not withdraw, although from his peppery disposition much caution must be observed for the future."

When the gentlemen had left Grosvenor Square, Lady Malcolm remarked, "Lord Ayrshire's propensity to such decided flirtation is very unfortunate, as he is a most agreeable, well-informed person, and in other respects quite unexceptionable; but his sister being a particular favourite of mine, I had invited both to dine with me to-morrow, to meet a few other friends, before Charles and Beauchamp had expressed themselves so warmly on his conduct, which I fear may lead to some unpleasantness."

"Not on William's part, I will engage," replied Mrs. Gordon, "from whom your guests will always receive every consideration, and you can of course give Charles a hint, if you think one necessary, which I do not, both so thoroughly appreciating the rights of hospitality."

After luncheon, Mrs. Gordon took Blanche and Constance with her to a flower-show at Chiswick, Malcolm and Beauchamp following on horseback; and they had scarcely left the square, when Mrs. Harcourt called on Lady Malcolm, and opened her budget of grievances about Blanche, commenting severely on her refusal of Lord Danby, and Mrs. Gordon's defence of her conduct. Lady Malcolm upheld her sister, saying she was quite right in allowing Blanche to exercise her own discretion, as any attempt to coerce her feelings would be attended with the usual result. "But I may tell you, Mrs. Harcourt, for your satisfaction, that Lord Danby is still particularly attentive to her, and the Marquis of Ayrshire most unpleasantly so, considering his well-known character for flirtation; but as both dine here to-morrow, you can form your own judgment."

It was then decided that Blanche should be presented at the next-drawing-room, the ensuing week. Soon after which, Mrs. Harcourt, on other visitors being announced, took her leave.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

The select dinner-party at Lady Malcolm's, the following day, consisted of Lord and Lady Arnmore, Marquises of Ayrshire and Danby, Sir Lionel Markham and Lady, with two daughters, Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt, and Mrs. Fortescue, with the Captain and Mr. Conyers. Beauchamp was not at first in a very entertaining mood, the occurrences of the previous day and Lord Danby's apparent determination still to persevere in his suit causing him considerable annoyance; but this very reserve was alone sufficient to induce Mrs. Fortescue, whom he handed in to dinner, to continue her attempts at drawing him into more general conversation; and Beauchamp, finding her ideas on many subjects coincided with his own, became more communicative, and somewhat of his usually cheerful manner returned.

Blanche, who sat nearly opposite, having maintained hitherto a rather grave demeanour towards Lord Danby, feeling piqued at what she thought her lover's unnecessary gaiety of speech to Mrs. Fortescue, sought her revenge by a similar display of light good humour towards his lordship; which Beauchamp taking as the gauntlet thrown down in defiance, redoubled his efforts to please, in which he succeeded so far as to make a very favourable impression on the young widow, who thought him the most sensible, cheerful, unaffected person she had ever met with. The exhibition of this false play between Blanche and Beauchamp produced, however, a certain effect upon Lady Malcolm, Mrs. Harcourt, and others, who took an interest in observing them, which, although not intended by the lovers themselves, yet in their present position proved most favourable to them.

After dinner, Lady Malcolm held a *grand réunion*, which means the condensing or compressing together two or three hundred persons into a space sufficient to accommodate comfortably one-third only of that number—the effects of which soon became perceptible on the brows of the country party.

"Confound it, Beauchamp!" exclaimed Conyers; "the black hole at Calcutta must have been a cool place in comparison to this; I am literally melting away—distilling from every pore of my skin, and can hold out no longer, so come along."

"Stay here awhile then, Conyers, near the door, whilst I say a word to Blanche before leaving. Have you seen her lately?"

"Yes, in the further room, surrounded by a host of admirers. By Jove! Beauchamp, her head will be turned with so much adulation! I thought how it would be when she came to London."

"Wait a moment, Conyers, I will soon return," replied Beauchamp, and he began to work his way through the crowd, until he discovered the object of his search sitting at the extreme end of the room, with Lords Ayrshire and Danby standing before her, vying in their efforts to obtain the greatest share of her smiles. Beauchamp stood for a short time behind them, unable to approach nearer; but Danby turning, on observing her change of colour and eyes directed beyond him, he gained a nearer position, and was able to address her.

"I think you will find it cooler and more agreeable in one of the other rooms."

"If Miss Douglas will be guided by my opinion," added Lord Ayrshire, "she will not run the risk of losing her seat for the chance of a more refreshing atmosphere, which is very doubtful; and I really think this the coolest place in the whole suite of apartments."

"If Miss Douglas will trust to my escort," said Beauchamp, advancing and offering his arm, "she will find my representation correct."

Blanche rose directly, and taking his arm, left Lord Ayrshire, who could scarcely suppress his mortification at Beauchamp's coolness in leading her off. On elbowing his way through the opposing masses, Beauchamp took Blanche to a small back drawing-room, where they found Constance and Malcolm.

"Have I deceived you?" inquired he, "or would you prefer the heated atmosphere you have left, which perhaps the flattering speeches of Lord Ayrshire may have compensated for?"

"Oh, no, William; I am too delighted to escape both, and wondered why you have kept so much aloof from me to-night."

"I thought you had been too agreeably entertained at dinner, and since by others, to need my presence."

"I may make the same reply, William, as to your flirtation with Mrs. Fortescue, which others have noticed besides myself."

'You set the example, Blanche, and I suppose flirting is infectious."

"Indeed, I am not conscious of having done so, although I did feel a little piqued by your gaiety."

"Then, my dear girl, pray do not let us vex each other again by such absurd fancies; and now, as Conyers is here"—who had followed them, and was talking to Malcolm—"I propose we all have a quiet ride together to-morrow, somewhere in the country, as I detest the heat and dust of the Park. What say you, Malcolm?"

"Just the thing, Beauchamp, to cool our heated frames after this baking;" to which Conyers assented, and two o'clock being fixed, Malcolm said, "Now, Constance, with your bad headache, pray go to your room, or you will not be fit for anything to-morrow, and I will tell my mother that I insisted on your doing so."

"I fear she will be offended, Charles."

"Pooh! nonsense, my dear girl; run away, and take Blanche with you, unless she prefers listening to Ayrshire's sweet voice a little longer."

"Not another second, Charles."

"Then be off, both of you"—with which the two girls, after an affectionate "good night" from their lovers, made their escape; Conyers and Beauchamp taking their departure at the same time to their hotel.

Lord Ayrshire remarked to Danby, as Beauchamp walked off with Blanche, "That Mr. Beauchamp is a monstrous co hand, Danby."

"Yes, and a very determined one as well; and you ha better be cautious how you contradict or stand in his way; f I know him well, and he will bear no trifling from any man. When put on his mettle, it is a word and a blow with him—and the blow generally comes first."

"Indeed! but what is Miss Douglas to him?"

"That I cannot tell you, except that they have been brought up together almost as brother and sister."

"Oh, I remember now! He is the fellow who knocked Vancourt about so deucedly."

"Yes, the same; and he is quite ready to administer the same sort of dose to any other man who may treat her with the slightest disrespect."

"Egad, Danby, what with him and Malcolm, one must keep at a respectful distance, I conclude, from the young lady."

"Certainly, unless you wish to be thrashed first, and shot afterwards."

Lord Danby, having now, as he hoped, lowered Lord Aryshire's top-gallant sails, left him to digest his remarks, which he knew would not prove very palatable to his haughty rival.

At two o'clock the next day, when Blanche and Constance, with Selina Markham, were waiting for their horses, a thundering knocking at the door was heard, on which Selina, who had lunched with them, sprang to the window, exclaiming—

"By all that's funny, Mrs. Summertop, I declare!"

"Mrs. Who?" inquired Lady Malcolm; but before an answer could be returned, Mrs. and Miss Winterbottom were announced, to the consternation of all the ladies and the delight of Malcolm, who whispered Constance—

"My gracious! Con, here she comes, sailing along like a full-blown peony. Oh, poor mamma!"

Constance rose at once to meet her, for the purpose of screening Lady Malcolm, who took the opportunity to escape by another door, leaving her sister to receive these unwelcome visitors.

"Well, my dear," gasped Mrs. Winterbottom, puffing from the exertion of mounting the stairs, "here we are at last, all in a bustle, like a bag of fleas; and how d'ye do, Mrs. Gordon and Miss Douglas?" shaking each by the hand; "and, my lord, 'ope your lordship's quite well."

"Charming, ma'am, thank you," replied Malcolm.

"And her ladyship—your mamma?"

"Rather ailing, this morning, from an attack of hypochondriasis."

"Oh, indeed! sorry to hear it, my lord—but never heard of the complaint before."

"It is chiefly confined, I believe," replied Malcolm, "to persons in fashionable life."

"But lauks, my dear," turning to Constance, "you and Miss Douglas look uncommon peaky—hope you won't catch the same disease."

"Nothing more likely," added Malcolm; "I suspect they are sickening with it already—or the scarlet fever."

"My gracious! my lord—I 'ope not—Honoria has never had that dreadful disease—or the small-pox either;—but I heard both the young ladies were going to court next week."

"If not prevented by illness, such is their intention, I believe," replied Lord Malcolm.

"Well, my lord, I was just a-thinking, if her ladyship would be so very obliging as to take me and Honoria under her wing at the same time, I should consider it a very great favour."

"I really cannot say what arrangements Lady Malcolm has made; nor am I aware if she has positively decided on being present at the next drawing-room."

"Well, my dear," turning to Constance, "I dare say you will let Honoria know her ladyship's intentions; and as we have taken a house for the season, in Albemarle Street, not far off, you know, just a nice little walk from Grosvenor Square, I hope you and Miss Douglas will look in upon us just in a friendly way, and Mrs. Gordon, too. Happy to see you at all times; so don't make any bones about fashionable hours. Papa is so fond of the theatre in Covent Garden that we always dine a quarter before six, to be ready for the play; so pray come when agreeable. Going for a ride, I suppose, Miss Douglas, in the Park? won't detain you any longer this fine day;" with which Mrs. Winterbottom bustled off.

"Ha! ha! ha!" cried Selina, "'pon honour, here's a treat in store for her ladyship—Mrs. and Miss Winterbottom, by Lady Malcolm!—my gracious! what a sensation such an announcement will produce!"

"Confound her impudence!" exclaimed Malcolm; "but it is an impossibility."

"Of course it is," replied Constance; "at least, I should never dream of hinting such a thing."

"This comes, my dear Con," said Selina, "of patronising such vulgar people, and asking the young lady to spend a few days at Bampton."

"It was done by my father's desire, Selina, and you know the reason why we endeavour to be on good terms with all our neighbours, even at some individual sacrifice; but this a most unexpected proposition, which I shall positively decline to make to Lady Malcolm."

"Well, come along," cried Malcolm, "Beauchamp and Conyers have just arrived; and Aunt Gordon can tell my mother as much as she likes about Mrs. Winterbottom;" on which they descended into the hall, and the ladies were placed on their steeds by their respective cavaliers.

Of all recreations, there is not one more exhilarating than a ride in the country on a fine May morning, when the weather is in that delightful temperature experienced generally in that genial month. May is the season of youth to all vegetable nature, then just bursting forth with all the freshness and fragrance of its early bloom. Even the leaves of the trees possess a softness of touch, and a lively, glossy verdure, which is not to be found in any other month.

As Beauchamp rode by the side of Blanche, he plucked a beech leaf from a bough overhanging the road, and placing it in her hand, said, "There, Blanche, is an emblem of yourself; can anything be more soft and delicate than the down of that pretty leaf, now just expanded in its youthful loveliness? Yet two months hence, after the dust and heat of the summer's sun, all this freshness and glossiness will be gone; so will, I fear, dear girl, the bloom now mantling in those glowing cheeks be destroyed by the over-heated, unhealthy atmosphere of these fashionable assemblies, which is more destructive to youthful complexions than the burning rays of the midsummer sun to the foliage of the trees."

"Oh, William! how I wish the London season was at an end, at least, as regards myself. This puts me so in mind of our happy rides in the country—shall we ever feel so happy again?"

"Yes, dear Blanche, there is no reason why we should not feel happier still; but all the happiness I can look forward to depends solely on yourself; and I fear the influence all this gaiety and dissipation may have on your young heart and mind. If those remain unchanged, by God's permission, I trust far happier days await us than any we have yet enjoyed together; although nothing could or can exceed the transport of that moment when first I found my love returned by her I prized more than life. But a more calm and steady feeling has now succeeded to that inexplicable, almost overwhelming sensation of ecstatic delight, which is experienced only on the first discovery of our affection being returned; but what it has lost in its novelty is now fully compensated for by its enduring and increasing strength. A truce now, however, to moralising; we must put our horses into a canter, to overtake Malcolm, who is nearly out of sight."

After a pleasant gallop through Richmond Park, the party returned home; the ladies much improved in appearance by their exercise, which had restored the roses to their cheeks, and dispelled the languor of the preceding night.

The next morning Constance returned Mrs. Winterbottom's visit, explaining to her that, Lady Malcolm being no relative of her own, she could not take the liberty of preferring her request about the presentation of herself and daughter at the drawing-room. "In fact," said Constance, "I am only a visitor in Grosvenor Square, and therefore could not presume to make such an overture to her ladyship, although I should be most happy to oblige you in anything which depended on myself."

"But you might get Lord Malcolm or Miss Douglas to speak for you, my dear," replied Mrs. Winterbottom; "or what's the use of friends and relations, if they won't do kind acts one for another?"

"Lord Malcolm makes a point of never interfering with his mother's arrangements in any way," continued Constance, "as she is very particular in some respects, even with her own son; and Miss Douglas is equally averse to asking such a favour of her aunt, to whom she is at present under so many obligations, as well as myself."

"Oh, very well, Miss Beauchamp; it don't signify making such a fuss about a trifle; but we aint grand enough for you quality folk, that's the secret."

"You have no reason to say that," replied Constance, rather indignantly, "of me or any of my family, as we have all shown you every attention in our power."

"Well, my dear, I did not mean to make any reflections against your worthy father, yourself, or young Squire Beauchamp; so don't be angry with me. And as you can't speak to Lady Malcolm, I must make papa look out for somebody else to present us at Court. Most things to be had in London for a consideration."

"No doubt," replied Constance, as she rose to take her leave.

CHAPTER XXXV.

We must now pass over a month. Blanche and Constance had been presented; both being much admired—but the former, from her superiority of height, brilliant, sparkling eyes, combined with her faultless form and graceful demeanour, attracted very general attention, to which the fact of her being an heiress, and Lady Malcolm's niece, gave additional charms. And after her inauguration at Almack's, she was unhesitatingly pronounced by the cognoscenti in female beauty, such as Lord Ayrshire, Danby, and others, the belle of the season.

Beauchamp witnessed with secret alarm the increasing number of Blanche's admirers and the adulation paid her, which he was powerless to avert, although his influence was still unsparingly exerted on every fitting occasion, to counteract the effects of the poison continually poured into her ears. To his quick, observant eye (and what perception is more acute than a lover's?) her repugnance to flattery began to yield, first to its endurance, and then to a more qualified reception of its pestilential breathings. Vanity is, without doubt, one of the chief compounds of human nature, by which all, even the very best of mankind, are influenced, although almost imperceptibly to themselves; and it would be absurd to say that Blanche Douglas did not feel pleased, perhaps rather elated, by the homage paid to her charms, although too pure in mind and innocent in heart to throw out the least lure by words or actions to attract it. There is an excitement in dissipation which drags its youthful votaries, first reluctantly, perhaps, then almost irresistibly, along its slippery path, until they become so thoroughly entangled in its mazes, as to be incapable of extricating themselves.

The London season was now in the zenith of its splendour, and invitations continued pouring in to Lady Malcolm in such rapid succession, that even her ladyship, though long inured and case-hardened to dissipation, began to feel wearied with its constant repetition. New additions had been made to her already extended list of acquaintances at the instigation of Blanche's admirers, many of whom, moving in the highest circles, had induced their mammas to send cards of invitation to Lady Malcolm and Miss Douglas. Amongst others, the Duchess of Castleton invited them to a grand ball, in which Malcolm and Constance were included; but Beauchamp, although long known to Lord Danby, and meeting him constantly at parties, was passed over. On the evening of this ball, he was dining in Grosvenor Square, when Malcolm observed, "We shall meet you, of course, to-night, Beauchamp, at Castleton House?"

"I have not received an invitation," was the short reply.

"How is this, Beauchamp? I took it for granted Danby had asked you long ago. Surely, then, he must have considered you included in our party."

"I think not, Malcolm; Lord Danby has particular reasons, no doubt"—casting a meaning look at Blanche—"for declining the honour of my presence at his mother's ball."

"Stuff and nonsense, Beauchamp; it must be an oversight; so come with us, as I am quite sure Danby will be glad to see you."

"You must excuse me, Malcolm; it is not my custom to obtrude myself anywhere without being unmistakingly invited."

"Riding the high horse again, my good fellow?"

"Not in the least, Malcolm, unless proper self-respect is to be so called. The slight was intended—as such it is accepted; and from this hour I shall decline the honour of his lordship's acquaintance."

"Really, my dear fellow, this is carrying things too far."

"Not further than I deem it incumbent on me to do; and I hope I shall never be deficient in proper spirit to meet the first approach to arrogance or insolence from any man, however high in rank, with the most thorough contempt. But my intended course with reference to Lord Danby need not influence you or others, as I do not wish any one to take up cudgels in my defence."

"I understand, however, what is implied," replied Malcolm, "that your sister ought not to attend the duchess's ball to-night."

"Constance knows what is due to her brother, as well as to herself," was the answer.

"Then, I suppose, she is not to accept any invitations unless you are included also?" retorted Lord Malcolm.

"Such an idea is almost too absurd to need refutation," added Beauchamp; "she has frequently done so, and will do so again, without any remark from me; but having known Lord Danby quite as long, if not longer, than your lordship has, and coupling his late very distant behaviour (scarcely recognising me, except by a stiff, formal bow) with the present exclusion from his mother's party, to whom you all (more recent acquaintances) are invited, I must be wilfully blind not to perceive the intended slight."

"In my opinion," observed Conyers, "Will is acting perfectly right, and if I saw any man inclined to cut me, I would save the necessity of our acquaintance dying such a lingering death by cutting him dead at once. Some of these grandees condescend to be very sociable, and shake hands with us country fellows on our own ground, where we may help in their amusement of hunting, or serve them for electioneering purposes; but when they meet us in town, the fog, I suppose, prevents them distinguishing such insignificant Liliputians, except through a magnifying glass, and then a very distant bow is the only sign of recognition."

"But I heard Lord Danby invite you to this ball myself," said Malcolm.

"Very true, my lord, and the same honour was conferred on Melville, Markham, and others, in my hearing. Beauchamp's exclusion, therefore, is more pointed; and as I am one of those old-fashioned fellows who act upon the *love me, love my dog* principle, and consider a slight to my best friend as an insult to myself, the conclusion to which I have come is very obvious—the duchess will not be incommoded by my presence to-night, and Lord Danby will be spared the trouble of raising his hat to me for the future."

"By Jove! Conyers," exclaimed Malcolm, "you are as ticklish as Beauchamp."

"If by ticklish, my lord, you mean sensitive to unprovoked insult, or contemptuous conduct towards myself or my friends, you have judged rightly of my character. Not for one moment will I submit to either; and as Beauchamp cannot go to Castleton House to-night, I certainly shall not."

"Then, what do you propose doing?"

"Oh, whilst you and the ladies are scanning the beauties masculine and feminine in high life, I will take Beauchamp to the green-room, behind the scenes, in Covent Garden, and have a look at the beauties in low life, and finish up with a lobster supper."

This conversation having commenced after the dessert was placed on the table, Lady Malcolm now rose, leaving the gentlemen to finish their discussion, when Lord Malcolm, failing to alter the two friends' determination, and beginning to lose his temper, proposed joining the ladies. Lady Malcolm had retired to dress; but Constance, taking Malcolm aside, began speaking to him in a low, earnest tone, stating her determination, after what had occurred, of not going to the ball.

"Pooh! nonsense, my dear," exclaimed Malcolm; "you must not adopt your brother's foolish crotchets; surely my wishes ought to be consulted now, as well as his, although I certainly shall ask Danby some explanation why he was not invited."

"On my account," said Beauchamp, who overheard these words, "I must beg, Lord Malcolm, you will not even hint at an explanation, as I neither require, nor will I accept any. Lord Danby and I understand each other quite well enough already; and now, my dear Constance, you must do violence to your own proper feelings, in taking your brother's part, by complying with my desire to accompany Lady Malcolm to the ball."

"Indeed, William, I had much rather not go," pleaded Constance; "and Lady Malcolm has been kind enough to excuse me."

"My dear girl," replied Beauchamp, "for Lady Malcolm's sake, who has, no doubt, accepted the invitation on your account and Blanche's, I must desire you will go; so not another word on the subject;" saying which, he turned away and resumed his seat, and was immediately joined by Blanche.

"You cannot be offended with me, I hope, dear William, because I could not venture to ask Lady Malcolm to excuse my attending her to-night, as Constance did. She, as your sister, had a fair pretext to decline going."

"But you, of course, had *none*," added Beauchamp, "not even to express one word in my favour, and left my friend Conyers to fight my battle alone."

"Now you are unjust, William; for although fearing to be thought forward in giving utterance to my sentiments, I have felt the slight offered you more deeply than Constance, and shall resent it as firmly as yourself after this night, when I cannot possibly be rude to Lord Danby in his mother's house."

"Of course not," replied Beauchamp; "and no doubt his arguments, like Lord Malcolm's, will weigh heaviest in the balance against mine, as your cousin, I see, is resolved to maintain his position by obtaining some excuse from Danby for not inviting me, which I am equally resolved not to accept. Extorted apologies of this sort make the matter ten times worse, and knowing this slight was purposely intended, Lord

Danby and myself must remain for the future strangers to each other."

"I shall not be influenced, William, by anything he or Charles may say, and shall leave you to judge, by my conduct towards him, whether I do not feel as deeply in your cause as Constance or Mr. Conyers."

"There, now, my dear girl, run away to dress, or you will be very late, and keep Lady Malcolm waiting. Come, give me your hand; good night."

"But where are *you* going?" she inquired, still holding his hand.

"With Conyers, to be sure; we must have our share of amusement as well as yourself."

"Oh, pray, dear William, do not go with him to those horrid places he spoke of. Promise me not to go there."

"If you will promise not to dance two quadrilles with any one partner to-night, I will give up going to the theatre, and sit with Aunt Gordon instead."

"The promise is yours, although you know there was no occasion to ask it; and I thank you, my own dear William, for resigning your amusement to please me. I shall not forget your kindness;" saying which, she tripped out of the room.

Malcolm and Constance had both left, and Conyers being engaged in conversation with Mrs. Gordon, Blanche and Beauchamp had an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête.*

"Well, Beauchamp," exclaimed Conyers, "what does Blanche think of our intended visit to the green-room to-night? A little fillip of that sort was not out of place, as she appeared to take it so coolly, going to Castleton House, without uttering a syllable, *pro* or *con*."

"Poor child! what could she have said?" asked Mrs. Gordon, "in her present situation? But I can tell you, William, that she does feel very acutely, and so do I, Lord Danby's behaviour to you, and you may rest assured she will resent it also."

"I am glad to hear it," replied Conyers, "for I hate half measures with friends or lovers, and Malcolm has fallen fifty per cent. in my estimation, by trying to throw dust in Will Beauchamp's eyes."

"Charles is very perverse sometimes," added Mrs. Gordon; "and he felt to-night his mother could not well decline going to the duchess's first ball; but we shall find him different to-morrow."

"I hope so," said Conyers, "or he'll find me very different for the time to come, and so I shall tell him plainly enough. I don't like being told black is white; but the fact is, Beauchamp, you and I have outstayed our welcome; and our visits to Grosvenor Square have ceased to be agreeable."

"Who told you so, Mr. Conyers?" asked Malcolm, having, unperceived, entered the room.

"My own common sense, Lord Malcolm, tells me that when an old, tried friend's conduct for acting consistently and uprightly is ridiculed and *pooh-poohed*, as your lordship has thought proper to do this evening, his presence can be no longer desirable."

"I do not choose to be dictated to, Mr. Conyers, by you or any man, in the course I ought to pursue."

"I have never ventured to dictate to your lordship since the time I took the liberty of giving you a few lessons in riding and other athletic exercises; and these, perhaps, are pooh-poohed now as antiquated precepts."

"I shall *never* forget your many acts of kindness to me when a boy, Mr. Conyers, or those of later years," replied Malcolm, considerably mollified.

"Very well, my lord; then if you will balance them against the attentions I have received from Lady Malcolm and yourself since my short stay in town, our account perhaps will stand nearly cancelled. And now, my lord, as you prefer new acquaintances to old faces, Beauchamp and myself propose returning home to-morrow."

"Stay, Conyers," as he was rising to leave the room, "I cannot part thus with one who has been to me like an elder brother. What would you have me do?"

"Nothing, my lord. You know as well as myself what you ought to do; and if you have that respect and regard for Will Beauchamp and his sister which you profess, you know perfectly well what your behaviour should be to any man who had dared to pass a premeditated slight upon your future brother-in-law; and now, Mrs. Gordon," said Conyers, shaking her by the hand, "I must wish you good-bye, and beg you to thank Lady Malcolm for all her kindness and hospitality," with which he hastily left the room, exclaiming, "Come, Beauchamp, I will wait two minutes for you in the hall."

Beauchamp rose quickly, and, taking Aunt Gordon's hand, said—

"I shall call to-morrow at twelve to see Lady Malcolm, and wish Constance good-bye before I leave town."

"And won't you wish me good-night?" asked Malcolm, as he was turning towards the door.

"Yes, Malcolm," offering his hand, "I do wish you a good-night, and regret I have been the cause of this unpleasant difference between you and Conyers; but I feel assured that no man of feeling could act otherwise than I purpose to do."

"Then I shall see you at twelve to-morrow?" added Malcolm.

"I shall call here at that hour," was the reply, as he ran down-stairs to join his friend.

Mrs. Gordon, overcome by emotion, had quietly left the room; and Lord Malcolm was pacing up and down, in no enviable mood, when his mother entered, and, observing her son's disordered looks, asked what had annoyed him so dreadfully.

"I am vexed to the soul, my dear mother, for having quarrelled with Conyers about such a foolish piece of business as going to this confounded ball—in short, he is right, and I am wrong; but I cannot bear the idea of being dictated to."

"Of course not, Charles—no one likes that, even from their oldest friends—yet there is no reason why you should go at all, or Constance—Blanche and myself will be sufficient."

"We are all in the same boat, my dear mother, according to Bob Conyers' opinion; but as I wish to ascertain from Danby whether he really did intend this omission of Beauchamp as a meditated slight (which, in common fairness, I ought to do before espousing his cause), I will accompany you there for half an hour or so, being fully resolved, if the case is as I now fear, to leave again directly."

"Very well, Charles, then I shall do the same, and order the carriage in an hour exactly from the time we are set down at Castleton House."

Meanwhile, Mrs. Gordon had communicated what had passed to Constance and Blanche, which caused their tears to fall fast.

"Don't vex yourselves, my dears, any more, or you will look wretched to-night, although it is very provoking in Charles, who might have given up one ball to oblige those friends who have so often obliged him. But dry your tears, as my sister has left her room; and I will see William early to-morrow, and prevent his leaving town."

When the ladies descended to the drawing-room, Lord Malcolm, observing his aunt's grave looks, said they had resolved on going to the duchess's ball, chiefly to ascertain the truth of Beauchamp's surmises; and, if correct, they should leave within the hour. Mrs. Gordon taking no notice of this remark, Malcolm remarked, "Does not this proposal please you, aunt?"

"It is of little consequence what pleases me, Charles."

"Then you think, aunt, I suppose, we ought not to go at all?"

There was no reply, as at this moment the carriage was announced; but Malcolm, on taking his mother's arm, said—

"We shall be home in an hour, aunt, if you will sit up till we return."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

On their arrival at Castleton House, Lords Ayrshire and Danby were waiting near the door of the reception-room, and asked Blanche for the honour of her hand. Lord Ayrshire, being first, was not refused.

"May I plead for the second, then, Miss Douglas?" inquired Lord Danby.

"I cannot engage myself for more than one dance," was the reply, "as Lady Malcolm intends remaining a very short time," with which she and Constance passed on to be presented to the Duchess, Lord Ayrshire following, who, after the ceremony of introduction, offered his arm to Blanche. Lord Danby, directly afterwards meeting Malcolm, remarked on Miss Douglas's cool reception of him, and asked if he knew the cause.

"Why, to tell you the truth, Danby, Miss Beauchamp feels hurt at her brother not being invited to your party; and these two girls, having been brought up together as sisters, share in each other's feelings and fancies; and an indignity offered to one is felt by the other."

"Oh, indeed, Malcolm, it was quite an oversight of my own in not sending Mr. Beauchamp a card for the occasion; but, from his almost living in Grosvenor Square, I thought he would consider himself included in the invitation to your family."

"Would you have presented yourself at any house, where you were almost a stranger to the heads of the family, on such an implied invitation?"

"Why, I scarcely know, Malcolm."

"Then I can tell you that Beauchamp is quite as proud as yourself; and having overheard you ask Conyers and Melville, he, of course, concluded he was purposely excluded."

"Oh, quite an oversight, Malcolm! I am sorry he should take offence; but our rooms are not spacious enough to contain all our country acquaintances."

"Depend upon it, my lord," replied Malcolm, nettled by this confirmation of Beauchamp's well-grounded deductions, "they will never be large enough to contain Will Beauchamp;" with which he turned away; and seeking Blanche, who was dancing, whispered, "Beauchamp is right. We shall leave as soon as the carriage arrives; so sit with my mother after this quadrille, and I will join you directly it is announced."

Lord Danby muttered to himself, "Confound that Beauchamp! he is ever in the way somewhere, and I suspect it is all true about his engagement to Miss Douglas; but I will find it out;" and hovering near her, he again renewed his suit for the next dance, which was again declined. "How have I been so unfortunate as to incur your displeasure, Miss Douglas? Is it because I omitted to invite Mr. Beauchamp to our ball, which I fear is the case from what Lord Malcolm has been telling me?"

"I have informed you, my lord, that Lady Malcolm has ordered the carriage very early, and my cousin begged me to remain with his mother until it arrives, and not to accept another partner."

"And I can answer," replied Lord Ayrshire, "that she has refused at least a dozen others since we have been engaged in this quadrille."

"Then may I hope for the honour of your hand," persisted Lord Danby, "for the first dance to-morrow night at Lady Husselton's, to which, I believe, you are going?"

"It is not yet decided whether we shall be there or not," replied Blanche; "but I do not make engagements of this kind beforehand."

The quadrille being finished, Lord Ayrshire conducted her to Lady Malcolm, where being again solicited for another dance by Lord Henry Bayntun, she made the same excuse.

"Oh, my dear," said Lady Malcolm, "if you wish to dance again, I can wait till the next quadrille is over."

"Charles desired I would not engage myself in another," she replied; "and I think I see him coming to announce the carriage;" which was the case.

On their return to Grosvenor Square, Mrs. Gordon had not retired; and when his mother went up to her room, Lord Malcolm said, "Beauchamp and Conyers have judged rightly; there can be no doubt now, from what Danby let fall, of the slight being premeditated."

"So we all thought, Charles; and I only regret you should have allowed your temper to get the ascendancy over your judgment, by ridiculing your friends' opinions."

"You know I hate dictation!" he replied.

"Yet invariably practise it, Charles."

"How so, aunt?"

"I have observed with deep sorrow your frequent attempts of late to throw discredit or contempt on almost every opinion expressed by William Beauchamp, and your ridicule of his honourable and religious principles; in short, since his arrival in town, your object appears to have been to make him feel the distinction between Lord Malcolm and Mr. Beauchamp. Now, however quietly he has borne outwardly your taunts and sarcasms, it is impossible that he does not feel acutely, although it has not been expressed openly, this change in your conduct; the result of which will be the rupture of that friendship which I had hoped and prayed might exist between you to the end of your lives."

"Indeed, aunt, I should be grieved to think, as you do, that anything I have said or done could destroy our regard for each other!"

"Then, Charles, be more cautious for the future, and bear in mind that true friendship admits of no assumed superiority of one person over another; *you* have assumed that superiority; and observe, it is, as I say, *assumed*, since in not one single particular are you superior to him you condescend to call your friend; no, not even in——"

"In what?" inquired Lord Malcolm, as his aunt stopped short.

"I was going to reveal what, perhaps, I ought not to have mentioned; but as this is the last time I shall ever address you on this subject, I will trust to your honour not to disclose the secret without my permission."

"It shall be strictly observed, aunt; so, pray, proceed!"

"Then, William will become, on the death of an old relative, now near ninety, Lord Beauchamp; and his worthy father, Earl of Annandale."

"What!" exclaimed Malcolm, in astonishment; "are you serious, Aunt Gordon?"

"I was never more so, Charles."

"Then why has he never confided this to me?"

"Because he has seen lately that you rejected his confidence."

Malcolm paced up and down the room in violent agitation, exclaiming, "What a fool! what a madman I have been!"

"Pray, Charles," said Constance, placing her hand on his arm, "pray, do not agitate yourself thus; all will be explained, I hope, to-morrow."

"Yes, my dear girl, indeed it shall; for I feel now how deeply I have wronged your brother, or he had never withheld his confidence from me; and you, Constance, you have known this secret?"

"Yes, Charles, on the condition I did not divulge it even to you."

"And Blanche, too?"

"Of course, Charles."

"To three women has Beauchamp, then, entrusted its keeping, but not to me!"

"And it has ceased, therefore," rejoined Mrs. Gordon, "to be a wonder, that a woman can keep a secret!"

"Yet I have kept one secret inviolably!" added Malcolm.

"Yes, Charles, you have; although poor Blanche has often trembled when its disclosure appeared hovering on your lips."

"My folly and thoughtlessness have been sufficiently punished now, dear aunt, to forbid a repetition of that *badinage* which has caused terror to my cousin, and misery of heart to my friend. Will you forgive me, dear Blanche, for the anxiety I have so thoughtlessly caused you?"

"Indeed I do, dear Charles," taking his profferred hand, "with all my heart."

"Thank you, my dear girl; it shall never be repeated; and can you forgive me also my unjust, unpardonable conduct to that noble-minded, generous fellow, who, of all men I have ever yet known, is alone deserving of your love?"

"Willingly, most willingly, dear Charles, do I forgive all that needs forgiveness from me!"

"And now, dear Aunt Gordon, I thank you most heartily for removing the veil from my eyes, and showing me the many faults I possess."

"Not many, Charles, I am happy to say; only learn henceforth to respect the feelings and opinions of others, if you wish them to respect yours."

"Let my future conduct prove the deep contrition I feel for the injustice I have done my friends; and now, aunt," ringing the bell, "I will order up some wine and water for these dear girls, who have been worried enough to-night, and then we will all retire to rest."

The next day Beauchamp kept his appointment with Mrs. Gordon, and arriving in Grosvenor Square about twelve o'clock, was ushered into the drawing-room, where Lady Malcolm was sitting with her son, Mrs. Gordon, and the two girls. After shaking hands with all, he approached Lady Malcolm again.

"I could not leave London, dear Lady Malcolm, without expressing in person my grateful thanks for your most friendly and hospitable reception of myself, and your numerous acts of kindness to my dear sister; for which I am and ever shall feel, most deeply obliged."

"But what is the cause of your leaving us so suddenly, William?"

"I will save Beauchamp the necessity of an evasive or indirect reply to your question, my dear mother," interposed Malcolm, "by stating candidly that I am the cause of his leaving town so unexpectedly; what has possessed me, I know not; but I am now fully sensible that my overbearing behaviour to him, of late, has been such as to disgust any man of less command of temper, and less depth of feeling, than him to whose friendship I have, by my fool-hardy bantering and obstinacy, justly forfeited all claim."

"From this hour," said Beauchamp, offering Malcolm his hand, "let the past be buried in oblivion, and I trust, for the future, we may be as before to each other."

"As a proof, then, of your forgiveness, Beauchamp, will you consent to remain? Under my present bitter and reproachful feelings, it would be the greatest consolation and favour you can bestow."

"You must not question the sincerity of my forgiveness, or my willingness to oblige you, Malcolm; but after due consideration last night, I have decided to leave London, and have written to my father to tell him he may expect me to-morrow evening."

"Will nothing induce you to alter that determination, Beauchamp?"

"Nothing that you can now urge, my dear Malcolm; it is for our future happiness that I am thus resolved."

"Enough!" said Malcolm, rising, and scarcely able to suppress his emotion, "I felt it must come to this; but will you see me in my own room a few minutes before you leave the house?"

"Most willingly, Malcolm." He then left the room.

"Can I not prevail on you to prolong your stay, Beauchamp?" inquired Lady Malcolm; "must I also plead in vain?"

"Do not distress me, dear Lady Malcolm, by asking me to do that which every feeling of my heart prompts me to do; but, indeed, it is best for us all that I should now leave you, although if, at the end of a fortnight, you wish to recall me, your summons shall be obeyed."

A double knock at the hall door being heard, Beauchamp rose quickly, and wished Lady Malcolm good-bye.

"Come with me into the next room for a few minutes," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon; "the girls and myself must trouble you with a few commissions. You are acting quite right," continued Mrs. Gordon, when the door was closed; "and much as we shall lament your absence, I approve your resolution to go, as it is quite necessary to convince Charles that your feelings are not to be outraged with impunity, although I believe his conduct has only proceeded from thoughtless waywardness. And now, my dear boy, not to prolong the misery of parting, God bless you, good-bye; write to me to-morrow, and let me know how your father is, and ride over to the Priory to see how things are going on. Blanche and I are tired of London, and shall soon return;" then folding him in her arms, Mrs. Gordon rushed from the room.

It was some little time before Beauchamp could tear himself away from Blanche, whose tears and sobs choked all utterance.

"My own, dear, precious girl, do not give way thus," he murmured, pressing her to his heart; "on my word of honour, I promise you to return any day you wish, if only for a few hours, to see you and Constance. Your summons shall be obeyed without an hour's delay; so if you require my presence, promise to write me without fail."

"I will promise to do so, my own, dearly-loved William."

"Now, then, dear girl, farewell;" and with another fervent embrace bestowed on her and Constance, Beauchamp was gone. Lord Malcolm used every entreaty in vain to divert his friend from his purpose.

"It must be so now, Malcolm," was his reply; "but I have promised your mother to return at the end of a fortnight, if she sends me an invitation; but really now I must spend a few days with my father, who has been so long solitary in the country; so good-bye, my dear Malcolm, and take care of those two warm-hearted, affectionate girls, for my sake. They have had too much gaiety lately; and if you will oblige me, do not let them go to more than two or three parties in the week—indeed, they cannot stand this unceasing round of dissipation. Am I asking too great a favour, or will it offend Lady Malcolm, to decline some invitations for them on my account?"

"My dear fellow, the three parties a week shall be strictly attended to," replied Lord Malcolm, "if I offend all London. The three parties a week shall not be exceeded—there is my hand upon it."

"Many thanks, Malcolm, for your promise, and I hope you will now walk with me to the stables, as I purpose riding home with Conyers, who has, I fear, been kept waiting there a long time."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

After having made up his difference with Conyers, and seen the two friends in their saddles, Malcolm returned to Grosvenor Square, and found his mother alone, Mrs. Gordon having taken the two girls for a quiet drive in the country.

"Beauchamp, my dear mother, has commissioned me to entrust two secrets to your keeping—one being considered of too little moment for any woman to preserve. The first is, that he is heir presumptive to an earldom—the other, that he is in love with Blanche, and she with him."

"The latter, Charles, I have long suspected; but the former I am surprised to hear, although well aware that the Beauchamps are of a very old and high family."

After a full explanation on these points, Malcolm added, "Now, my dear mother, Beauchamp being, as you may suppose, very anxious about the well-being of our two precious girls, has exacted from me a promise that they shall not be overbaked by too much hot air, *i.e.*, over-crowded rooms, which he says has made them look like drooping lilies of the valley, instead of roses, so that they are to be restricted to three balls or parties a week for the future, until he returns; and as Beauchamp's ideas are always right, and mine always wrong, his instructions to me on this point shall be religiously observed to the letter, if I am obliged to lock them up in their rooms the alternate three nights. This being resolved on, your ladyship must make your selection accordingly from that basket of cards, as the number, three per week, is not to be exceeded."

"Well, Charles, upon the whole this is very agreeable news, and I am delighted with the bright prospect opening to William Beauchamp, which will also improve Constance's position very materially; but I fear Mrs. Harcourt will not be pleased with Blanche's choice, although, from my great partiality to William, she will find a most firm advocate in me."

"That's right, my dear mother; but bear in mind, this is to be a secret still to all; not a word to Mrs. Harcourt or a breathing soul, until Beauchamp gives us permission to divulge it."

"Don't fear me, Charles; it shall be strictly observed."

Soon after, Mrs. Gordon and the girls returned, when Malcolm acquainted them, before they ascended to the drawing-room, with the communication he had made to his mother by Beauchamp's desire.

"William has acted most wisely and properly," replied Mrs. Gordon; "and now, Charley, you see his confidence in you is replaced."

"All smooth again, aunty dear, with your hair-brained nephew, and you shall see if I don't attend to orders about those two girls."

Lady Malcolm, although rather too much addicted to gaiety and dissipation, was very warm-hearted, and almost foolishly fond of her only son Charles, who had been a spoilt child (as only children generally are, when left solely to a mother's care). Being naturally attached to her own order, and her acquaintance lying chiefly among the nobility, Lady Malcolm had at first resisted her son's proposal of marriage with Miss Beauchamp, in the hope of his forming a higher connection; but finding remonstrance unavailing, her consent was at last obtained, and she had become every day since more convinced of the wisdom of her son's choice, loving Constance as her own daughter. Her delight, therefore, may be imagined, when so unexpectedly informed of Mr. Beauchamp's certain advancement to the peerage, and William rose considerably in her estimation as a desirable match for her niece; the Earl of Annandale being known as the possessor of very large landed property which went with the title.

Of the small family party at dinner that evening, Lady Malcolm was the only person in buoyant spirits, poor Blanche sitting silent and depressed. When the servants withdrew, she rallied her niece on her desponding looks. "Come, my dear, cheer up; you will scarcely be presentable at Lady Arnmore's to-night."

"Indeed, dear aunt, I hope you will excuse me going with you there, as I am quite unequal to any exertion this evening."

"Well, my love, you are to do exactly as you please now, in accepting or refusing any invitations; for, to confess the truth, I have accepted many more than I usually do, entirely on your account, in the full expectation, after the impression you have made, of seeing an announcement in the papers, before the conclusion of the season, of a certain little ceremony having been performed at St. George's, Hanover Square, between the Marquis of A. or D. and the beautiful and accomplished Miss Douglas, niece to Lady Malcolm of Grosvenor Square. Of course, my dear, there was a little pardonable vanity, on my side, mixed up in this anticipated *dénouement*, but as you appear to think *Lady Beauchamp* a much prettier name—to which I quite agree—with the Countess of Annandale in perspective, I have only been building castles in the air to little purpose, like other enthusiastic people. Yet, joking apart, my dear Blanche, I thoroughly approve your choice."

Blanche, blushing excessively, expressed her thanks for her aunt's kindness and commendation of her lover, when Malcolm added, "Ah, my dear, that Will Beauchamp is a very Bluebeard already, and what will he become with a title tacked to his name? My gracious! as Mrs. Summertop says, there will be no living in the same house with him. To begin, my love, he has laid an embargo on you, that you do not attend more than three balls or parties per week, and appointed me keeper of the seals, or private turnkey, to lock you up in your own room every other night after eleven, and it shall be done, Blanche, by Jupiter Ammon! as the old squire says. Will Beauchamp is a long-headed fellow, and his edicts and opinions are not to be gainsayed; so now, my love, as you don't go with us to-night, I will see you to your room before I leave the house, and take the key in my pocket. Just fancy Ayrshire's astonishment—anticipating, no doubt, a little *tête-à-tête* in his sister's boudoir. 'Are we not to have the honour of seeing Miss Douglas to-night?' 'Oh, no, my lord, can't come—very naughty—locked in her room—here's the key.'"

"Oh, Charles, Charles," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon; "can't you spare your cousin this one night—are your promises so soon forgotten?"

Blanche burst into tears, and was escaping from the table, when Malcolm sprang from his chair, and throwing himself before her on one knee, seized her hand, exclaiming, "Oh, Blanche! my dear, soft-hearted girl, will you forgive my ill-timed foolery? but, indeed, I thought to rouse your spirits; that was my only motive, on my honour."

"Dear Charles, I believe you," she replied; "but my heart is too full now to bear even a joke—pray let me go to my room."

"So you shall, my love," opening the door for her; "but do you forgive me?"

"She may; but I shall not, Charles," interposed Mrs. Gordon, taking her niece's arm and leading her away.

The fourth morning after Beauchamp had left London, Mrs. Gordon received a very affectionate letter from him, with another enclosed for Blanche, written in the most affectionate terms, and enjoining her to be more careful of herself for his sake; telling her also that, having felt persuaded of Lady Malcolm's motives in taking her to so many parties, and witnessing her decreasing health and strength from such excessive dissipation, he had deemed it expedient to make her ladyship acquainted with their relative position, which he hoped would at once put a stop to that incessant whirl of gaiety. After having perused the contents half a dozen times in her own room, Blanche sought Mrs. Gordon.

"There, dear aunt, I must show you this kind, affectionate letter from my own dear William, which has made me so very happy."

"Then you can read mine in the meantime, my love, which has put me also in high spirits."

Next to the pleasure of seeing those we love, is the enjoyment of seeing their handwriting when separated from us, and the delight of Mrs. Gordon and her niece on perusing Beauchamp's heart-stirring terms of endearment to them both (though rather differently worded as applied to each) is easier to imagine than describe. Lord Malcolm, after a severe lecture from his aunt, now ceased his bantering tone towards his cousin, endeavouring by every attention to make amends for his late conduct to herself and her lover, who, it must be confessed, from the recent disclosure of his high expectations, had become a person of much greater importance than heretofore. Instead of confining them to the hot, dusty ride in the Park, Malcolm now accompanied the two girls on horseback into the country almost every day, and Lord Ayrshire, noticing the hour at which they generally left Grosvenor Square, frequently joined them, although Malcolm gave him no cause for encouragement, pertinaciously adhering to his cousin's side, leaving Constance to be entertained by the Marquis.

As the family in Grosvenor Square were loitering over a late breakfast, a few days after Beauchamp's departure from town, an unexpected visitor was ushered into the room, in the person of his cousin. "Why, Fred!" exclaimed Malcolm, greeting him warmly, "who would have thought of seeing you in the mighty Babylon—anything amiss at Bampton?"

"Oh, no, Malcolm! all right in that quarter."

"Then what brought you here, if it is not an impertinent question?"

"A certain vehicle called a coach, with four as spicy nags as you could wish to sit behind, from our last stage at Hounslow."

"Well, that I can suppose; but you are not much of a city mouse."

"True enough, Malcolm; but you know one fool makes many, and as Bob Conyers and all the rest of our country neighbours have set the example, you see I have been fool enough to follow it, and take a peep at London life, since it's deuced dull work in the provinces just now. Will returning to do a bit of kennel with the young entry, I've got leave of absence from the governor to have a shy at the Londoners."

"Ay, ay, Fred, I see how it is; Beauchamp has sent you up here to look after us all."

"Begging your pardon, my lord, Will is too knowing a fellow to send a madcap like myself on such an errand, lest I might do a little business on my own account in a certain quarter," with a smile and look at Blanche. "No, no, Malcolm; I should in that case be like the monkey roasting chestnuts."

"Well, Fred, we are all right glad to see you; and as Will won't look at a certain young widow in a matrimonial point of view, egad, I think she will just suit your book, *id. est*, if you can take up the running."

"Then, Malcolm, I've no objection to try my luck, provided she is likely to suit."

During this dialogue, broken at intervals, Fred had shaken hands with the ladies, and answered various little inquiries anent country friends and country affairs, when Malcolm rising, said, "Well, Fred, you dine with us this evening, as a matter of course, and we go to Almack's afterwards, when I will introduce you to the widow."

"I hardly know what to say to that proposition, and don't think I can sport brass enough for such an august assembly."

"Pooh, pooh, Fred! you have brass enough for anything—faint heart, you know, won't do in these cases."

Constance here interposed, saying, if he would accompany them, Blanche would accept him as her first partner.

"Well, Con, that of course decides the matter."

"And if not wilfully disposed to turn restive," she added, "we will enlist you in our service for the whole of the day, as I have a hundred little things to talk about before the dinner hour."

"I am quite at your service, my fair cousin," replied Fred; "so do with me as you please."

"Well, then, we will take a drive after luncheon, in Aunt Gordon's carriage, as I know your dislike to drawing-room work, and show you the belles in the park on our return."

Malcolm, having an engagement, soon after left the ladies and Fred to get through their time until the carriage came to the door. Various conjectures were hazarded on Fred Beauchamp's appearance in Mrs. Gordon's carriage, by the noble Marquis, until he encountered Captain Markham, who at once solved the mystery. "What! another bumpkin of the Beauchamp family, Markham?"

"Eh! 'pon honour, Ayrshire, you don't fancy the name much; but, my fine fellow, take care Fred don't hear you call him a bumpkin, or——"

"What, Markham?"

"You'll have to attend a little meeting somewhere in the country pretty soon."

The Marquis turning away muttered, "Ah, another fool in my path, I suppose."

On Fred's standing up at Almack's in the first quadrille that night with Blanche Douglas, he had to undergo the ordeal of a first appearance in public or fashionable life, which not altogether relishing, he remarked to his partner: "Some of those dowagers will know me again, I conclude, although my Lord Danby gave me the cut direct just now. By Jove! if I meet him again in the hunting field he shall have cause to remember me to the last hour of his life."

"Don't speak so loud, Fred," she whispered, "he is just behind us."

"So much the better, Blanche—I hope he heard me; but—I beg pardon—perhaps he is in favour again with yourself?"

"Oh, no, Fred, that is certainly not the case; nor likely to be."

"Glad to hear it, for I hate fellows who know men only in the country. But, to judge by appearances, you seem to have a good many strings to your bow—or in other words, a rather long list of admirers."

"And yet, Fred, I would much rather be at Bamp——, I mean the Priory, than joining in this gaiety."

"Why not have said Bampton, Blanche, at once?"

"Well, I might have said so," she replied, "as I never enjoy anything more than a visit to the old squire."

"Except, Blanche, a visit to the young one."

"Don't be impertinent, Master Fred," was the rejoinder; "or I shall cut you, like Lord Danby."

"Oh, very well; but I wonder of whom poor Will, in his solitary den, is thinking at this moment?"

A shadow passed over the features of Blanche Douglas at these words, which was broken by Fred's saying—

"Don't distrust me, dear Blanche, for Fred Beauchamp can jump over or see through a stone wall as quickly as most people; although neither Will nor yourself will honour me with your confidence; but there—perhaps you are right, as I am a giddy, thoughtless fellow, and might let the cat's head peep out of the bag."

"I do not doubt your sincerity, Fred—but this is forbidden ground."

"I know it, Blanche; and my sincere hope is, it may not be so much longer."

The dance over, Constance introduced her cousin to Mrs. Fortescue, with whom he seemed much struck; and they were soon seen dancing together in high good humour. The widow endeavoured, ineffectually, to ascertain the cause of his cousin's abrupt departure from London. "It is rumoured," she remarked, "he had left in consequence of being rejected by a certain young lady, with whom you were dancing this evening."

"That, you may take my word," replied Fred, "is a deliberate falsehood. Will Beauchamp never has been, and never will be, rejected by any woman."

"Do you consider him then perfectly irresistible?" with an arch smile.

"Oh, no, not quite that; but he has good sense enough never to propose before being quite certain that he would be accepted."

"Then he did not propose to Miss Douglas before leaving town?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, really, the world is very ill-natured; but perhaps he is engaged to some one else?"

"Not to my knowledge; although he does not confide secrets of this kind to me."

"Probably he has a *penchant* for some young lady who lives in your neighbourhood?"

"That, I suspect, is the case," replied Fred; "but more I cannot, if I would, tell."

Mrs. Fortescue had heard too much now, and relapsed into a thoughtful mood, from which she was rallied in turn, by Fred Beauchamp saying, "You appear to take rather a deep interest in my cousin's love affairs. Is he a very old friend of yours?"

"Not very," was the reply; and a deeper tint stole over her cheeks; "but we met several times during his short stay in town, and I liked him very much, from being so different to the generality of our fops and fine gentlemen. But don't you think Miss Douglas exceedingly lovely?"

"Ah, yes," replied Fred, "beautiful—too beautiful—but I look at her as I do at a splendid three hundred-guinea horse—beyond my reach; and her guardian, Harcourt, will have a peer for his ward—nothing short will do for the heiress. So you see my falling in love with her is a hopeless affair."

"Then you confess to being in love with her, Mr. Beauchamp?"

"I won't deny," he replied, "that I have been in that predicament; but the fit has passed, as others have before; in short, since the age of fourteen, I have always been the slave of Cupid. First, I was smitten by a housemaid at our school, a buxom young lady, nearly six feet high, who knocked out the first flame by knocking me off a high-backed chair, on which I had perched myself to snatch a kiss from my enchantress. In falling against the edge of the table, a black eye was the consequence, for which, not being able to give a satisfactory explanation to our master, who declared I had been fighting with another boy, I got a thorough good flogging. This cooled my courage for a twelvemonth; after which I had a desperate affair with the daughter of the village schoolmaster—possessing a very red face, snub nose, and black, glossy ringlets. The flame being reciprocal, clandestine meetings, billets doux, and little presents followed; but one from my Dulcinea, a lock of hair, nearly extinguished the fire, as well as your humble servant at the same time."

"Pray may I ask how, Mr. Beauchamp?"

"Oh, certainly, if it will afford you any satisfaction to know how silly I was in my teens. Well, you must know then, that of this precious lock I swallowed one hair per night, at bedtime—such was the devouring nature of my passion."

"Really, Mr. Beauchamp," exclaimed the gay widow, laughing at the drollery of the thing, "you must be joking now, to see how much *I can swallow*."

"Well may you laugh at such an absurdity!" continued Fred, "but, 'pon honour, it is perfectly true. I had nearly eaten up the lock, hair by hair, when one night, from an over-exciting meeting with my beloved, I took an extra allowance, two or three together, which, sticking in my throat, nearly choked me; in short, I had a *hair*-breadth escape of my life, from being patted on the back by the strapping housemaid—who came in to take our candles away—until the breath was knocked out of my body."

"Oh, Mr. Beauchamp, how very ridiculous!"

"Yes, ridiculous enough; and it surprises me now to think how I ever could have been such a ninny."

"Well, but how did this love affair terminate?"

"Rather tragically; my master having caught me kneeling at my fair one's feet one evening in a secluded arbour, gave me a precious good caning, upbraiding me the while for being a sallow-faced, hook-nosed, sparrow-legged dog, in the presence of the young lady, by which my *amour propre* was more hurt than my back; and my enchantress not exhibiting much compassion at my distressed situation, but rather inclined, I thought, to titter at these insulting epithets, flame number two was thus quickly put out. I had, it is true, formed a desperate resolution of covering my shame and love together in a duck-pond; but the water looked so extremely dark and disgusting, that the idea of spoiling a new pair of white trousers saved me. Since then, with the exception of looking at Blanche Douglas in the same light as a cat is said to look at a king, from a respectful distance, I have preserved a very decided antipathy to throw myself at any young lady's feet. In short, before committing myself the third time, which it is said pays for all, but how is not sufficiently explained, I purpose advancing very cautiously, by asking the third flame, as a preliminary to further proceedings, whether I *may* fall in love with her or not."

"You have given me a very amusing account of yourself, Mr. Beauchamp; and I can only wish you success in your next adventure."

"Thank you, Mrs. Fortescue; but will you assist me also, in case I meet a lady here to-night, who takes my fancy?"

"Oh, certainly," she replied, laughing; "if I have any influence with the fair one."

"A thousand thanks," he replied, gaily. "I shall not forget your promise; and now, I conclude, our dance being ended, I must thank you for the honour you have done me in accepting my hand, and wish you good night."

They thus parted, and it must be confessed that Fred's handsome person and unaffected manners made a favourable impression on the young widow.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BEAUCHAMP'S sudden disappearance from London, coupled with the unusual gravity of Blanche's demeanour since his departure, gave weight to the rumour originating with Lord Ayrshire, that he had been rejected by the heiress, which imparted fresh impulse to his hopes, as well as to her other admirers—except Lord Danby, who was puzzled how to account for Lord Malcolm's coolness to him since his mother's ball.

"I cannot understand them," observed Lord Danby to Ayrshire one day, when they were discussing the subject. "Malcolm has certainly taken offence at my not inviting Beauchamp; and Miss Douglas, too, by her altered manner when we meet—in fact, she will scarcely speak to me: how then can Beauchamp be rejected?"

"Simply enough, my dear fellow. Malcolm and his cousin may both like Beauchamp well enough—too well to pass over any slight offered to him; but, depend upon it, Lady Malcolm looks higher for her niece, and therefore the young country squire has had his dismissal—nothing more likely, and I am satisfied in my own mind this is the fact."

"Well, Ayrshire, I quite agree with you that this is a very natural solution of the mystery; and knowing before her guardian's decided objection to this young pretender, I think it more than probable that he has been ordered to the right-about."

Blanche's returning cheerfulness, after the receipt of Beauchamp's letter, tended also to impress Lord Ayrshire (who had joined them again in their ride that afternoon) with the idea that the wound inflicted on the heart of Miss Douglas by her lover's dismissal was one of a very superficial character, and he argued with himself—

"Ah, young girls brought up in the country have always some bumpkin hankering about them, with whom they fancy themselves terribly in love, until the delusion is dispelled by their coming to London and meeting well-bred, polite men of the world; they then wonder at the absurdity of their first foolish, romantic *penchant* for a fellow who has not two ideas in his head, beyond the price of corn and cattle; and whose fund of entertainment consists of a few threadbare sporting anecdotes, too coarse for a lady's ear. A few tears, of course, at parting; and, by the end of the first week, Colin is forgotten!"

There was another cause, also, for Blanche's cheerfulness—Lady Malcolm's knowledge and full approval of her choice, which she believed would carry great weight with her guardian; so that she felt comparatively at ease on that point, and in good humour with every one and everything around her. On this morning her pretty Arab obtained an unusual share of caresses and pattings from the hand of his fair mistress, and Lord Ayrshire's sparkling conversation elicited her approving smiles.

It was now the Harcourts' turn for a grand display—invitations having been issued a month previously, to ensure a full attendance for a ball to take place that night; and it being generally known by this time that Mr. Harcourt was Miss Douglas's guardian, admittance to their party was eagerly sought by all the fashionable young men about town. Mrs. Harcourt, as may be supposed, derived no trifling satisfaction from observing the crowd of aristocratic admirers pressing round her niece, all anxious for a share of her smiles; but Lord Ayrshire, from his great wealth, and as leader of *ton*, had become her especial favourite.

After having met Mr. Harcourt at Lady Malcolm's, the

Marquis continued his acquaintance, cards were exchanged, and invitations followed, so that the two families were now on visiting terms, and Lord Ayrshire had dined in Upper Brook Street two or three times previously to the Harcourts' ball, when he ingratiated himself into the lady's favour by bestowing the most high-flown panegyrics on her niece, declaring her, without exception, the belle of the season. Mrs. Harcourt in turn descanted on her many amiable qualities, and gave a glowing description of her fine mansion and large landed property in Scotland, with a hint of their expectations that she would form some suitable alliance. Having made these preliminary observations, Mrs. Harcourt flattered herself that, before the close of the season, she should see her niece Marchioness of Ayrshire; and so in all probability she would, had Blanche been ambitious of this distinction.

On this night, Lady Arnmore, sitting near Mrs. Harcourt, when her brother was dancing with Miss Douglas, remarked, "I have never seen George so unremittingly attentive to any young lady as he has been to Miss Douglas since our first ball. We have long given him up as a confirmed bachelor, but I really begin to think he is caught at last, and now for the first time seriously in love."

"My niece," replied Mrs. Harcourt, thinking to enhance her value, "has very peculiar ideas on marriage, and having a splendid fortune of her own, will neither marry for title nor money alone."

"Well really, Mrs. Harcourt, they appear mutually pleased with each other at present. Miss Douglas is the very person to suit my brother, and provided he is sufficiently agreeable to her, I think it will be a case for St. George's Chapel ere long."

The fact was that Blanche, having met several of her old country friends that night—the Markhams, Rollestons, Comptons, and others—felt more at home and in higher spirits than usual, which Lord Ayrshire interpreting in his favour, and attributing to his own very delightful society, presumed to ask for a second dance. That request, reminding her at once of her absent lover's advice on this point, caused an instantaneous revulsion of feeling and gravity of features. The thought passed like a flash of lightning through her mind—"What would he say to my gaiety to-night, whilst he is sitting at his lonely fireside, thinking of his own dear Blanche?" For a moment she became lost in reverie, but on the question being repeated by Lord Ayrshire, she replied, with some appearance of hauteur, "I have made a rule, my lord, never to dance twice on the same night with any partner."

"There are exceptions to all general rules, Miss Douglas, and I hope you will permit me to claim the privilege of being an exception to yours."

"I am sorry, my lord, I cannot grant you that privilege," was the reply.

"Then do you really never make any exception to this rigid rule?"

"Very rarely, and only in favour of very old friends."

"Of whom, Miss Douglas, I conceive you must know very few who would be likely to ask for your hand in a ball-room."

"Whether few or many," replied Blanche, highly offended, "the Marquis of Ayrshire has not been known to me long enough to be included in that number."

"I beg a thousand pardons for giving this unintentional offence, but my meaning was that very old people are not generally very partial to dancing."

"And yet, my lord, my very old friends need not necessarily be very old persons; for instance, my cousin Malcolm, who is only a few years older than myself; but having known him from childhood, he is one of my very oldest friends."

"I stand corrected, Miss Douglas, for my futile attempt at jocularity, which appears to have been exceedingly ill-timed; but, believe me, no reflection whatever was intended on your friends."

Blanche made no reply, and Lord Ayrshire puzzled his brain in vain to account for her unexpected transition from light good humour to grave formality. But the dance being concluded, he was obliged to resign her hand without the opportunity of obtaining any further elucidation.

On entering the room that night, Selina Markham had suggested that they should sit through one quadrille together to have a chat, to which Blanche assented. "You are almost danced off your legs, my dear, and were I in your place, I would see half these fine fellows smothered in the Serpentine mud before I would fag myself to death by accepting them for partners, night after night, as you do. So hold yourself engaged to me—as I have a little bit of gossip to talk about—for one quadrille."

"Won't it look very strange, Selina, for us both to be sitting together?"

"Not in the least, my dear, only missed our partners, or they missed us—nothing more common in such crowds as these."

At the appointed time, therefore, the two girls ensconsed themselves in the most retired seats of the apartments they could select, hoping to escape observation.

"There, I declare," exclaimed Selina, "that jackanapes Bayntun has found us out already;" as he approached with, "May I have the honour, Miss Douglas?"

"No, you can't," said Selina, "she's engaged as well as myself."

"Very odd, Miss Markham, that you should both have lost your partners."

"Your lordship is always thinking about the odds," replied Selina; "but, whether odd or even, we hav'n't lost our partners, and as you can keep a stable secret, I will tell you a ball-room one. We are both tired of dancing, and therefore have decided on a little respite. You know what running a horse off his legs means, so have a little compassion on Miss Douglas."

"Then will you allow me the next dance after this, Miss Douglas?"

An assent being given, Selina added, "On the condition that you leave us now to ourselves," with which Lord Henry bowed and withdrew.

"Well, my dear Blanche, what a bore it must be to be a belle, listening night after night to all the soft twaddle of so many soft heads. I declare it would drive me distracted, or send me to sleep, and I advise you to pick out half-a-dozen of your best and richest admirers to choose from, and turn the rest adrift, for it is high time to make up your mind, and select one pet to keep the others off from so continually pestering you with their attentions. *A propos*, the *on dit* is, in well-informed circles, that Lady Malcolm has given Will Beauchamp his *congé* for proposing to her niece, and that his travelling ticket was made out at a moment's notice, and it does appear very strange that he left in such a vast hurry, without the slightest notice to any one."

"And pray, Selina, of whom did you hear this news?"

"My brother Ned says it is the general talk at the clubs, where, by the way, there is more gossip discussed than at any old woman's tea-party. Those clubs, my dear are the cause of quarrels and dissensions among married couples, almost innumerable, and mischief incalculable—destructive of connubial bliss; for, on the slightest pretences, the husband flies off to his club, then somewhere else, and leaves his poor young wife moping at home. In short, I recommend you to make it a condition in your marriage articles, that the Marquis is to resign his club, or forfeit an additional thousand a-year to you as pin-money."

"What Marquis are you talking of, Selina?"

"Oh, *the* Marquis *par excellence*—the all-accomplished, all-learned, most agreeable, most rich, most noble Marquis of Ayrshire; who, report says, has laid all his honours, riches, and his own proud, supercilious, precious person, at your feet."

"My dear Selina, you are talking great nonsense; he has done nothing of the kind."

"Ah, well, my dear, then that honour is in store for you. A pleasure only deferred."

"You are quite mistaken, Selina; such an idea, perhaps, has never entered into his head; but our *tête-à-tête* is at an end, as I see Lord Henry approaching."

Selina, with the curiosity natural to her sex, was very anxious to ascertain how her friend stood in regard to Beauchamp and Lord Ayrshire! the latter being openly spoken of as the object of her selection from the host of her other admirers. But Blanche possessed sufficient caution never to betray her secret; and left Selina in the dark as to her true feelings.

The next morning, at breakfast, she received a few hurried lines from Beauchamp, informing her that his father had just been summoned to attend the Earl of Annandale, who, being considered by his physician in a declining state, and not likely to recover, they were setting off immediately for the North; but that she should hear from him again, on his arrival at Annandale Castle.

On this intelligence being communicated to Malcolm, he exclaimed:—

"My stars! Blanche, here's a go! as Selina says, Lord Beauchamp and my Lady Constance! Why, Con, I suppose you will order me to the right-about at once; and as to my Lord Beauchamp, there will be no bearing him now."

"Titles or riches will never alter either one or the other, Charles," said Mrs. Gordon; "and I am quite sure that William will never rejoice at any man's death, although that should open his path to title and wealth."

"Of course not, my dear aunt; but as people now-a-days do not attain the age of Methuselah, when a man has counted ninety years, he cannot reasonably complain that his span of life has been cut very short; and this event, whenever it may happen, will place Beauchamp in a position to render Blanche independent of her guardian's powers or favours."

Immediately after breakfast, Malcolm conveyed the news to his mother, who could not suppress her delight at the prospect of her future daughter-in-law's advancement, as well as at Beauchamp's elevation to a higher sphere. "And now, Charles," she added, "I suppose the secret may be disclosed?"

"Oh, no, my dear mother, our lips are sealed until Beauchamp allows us to open them—that was the condition; and our promises must be faithfully maintained. Moreover, the event has not yet happened; and should the old peer take a fresh lease, we should only be laughed at and despised for reckoning our chickens before they are hatched."

The same afternoon, when Blanche and Constance, with Malcolm and Fred, had set out for their usual ride, Mr. Harcourt called in Grosvenor Square, and, finding Lady Malcolm at home, opened his commission by informing her of the joyful realisation of his and Mrs. Harcourt's wishes, that morning, by a proposal from the Marquis of Ayrshire for her niece's hand. "This is really quite beyond our expectations, Lady Malcolm, as the Marquis is enormously rich; and he has offered, in the most handsome manner, to settle the whole of her fortune, with a large addition from his own, strictly upon herself, in case of his decease, and five thousand a-year entirely at her own disposal during his life."

"Very liberal indeed," replied Lady Malcolm, rather coolly.

"Then I presume, on the part of your niece, your ladyship will at once accept Lord Ayrshire's proposals, as I believe she has already given him sufficient encouragement to expect a favourable answer."

"There, Mr. Harcourt, I think Lord Ayrshire must be under some delusion; as, from my own observation, Blanche has *not* given him any encouragement at all; in fact, from his lordship's well-known character of playing the flirt with young girls, she received a caution from me at first to be on her guard; and I do not believe she ever entertained the most remote idea of accepting his attentions as a suitor, although finding him agreeable enough as an acquaintance."

"I am quite astonished, Lady Malcolm, at this unexpected intelligence. What can any girl be thinking of, to refuse such an offer?"

"Perhaps, Mr. Harcourt, she may be thinking of some one else she likes better."

"May I beg the favour, then, of your ladyship informing me of the name of the person whom Miss Douglas prefers to the Marquis of Ayrshire."

"That, at present, I am not in a position to reveal, Mr. Harcourt."

"It is manifest, however, that your ladyship is aware there is such a person, and, as the guardian of Miss Douglas, I hope Lady Malcolm will not think me too presuming in saying that I have a right to know the gentleman's name—probably Mr. Beauchamp, or some needy adventurer in want of her fortune."

"Needy adventurers, Mr. Harcourt, are not very likely to obtain my sanction, any more than your own, and it is neither decorous nor complimentary in you to speak in such terms to me, who take an equal, if not superior, interest in my niece's welfare. Yet, as her guardian, I will tell you thus much; the person to whom I allude has as yet made no direct proposal to me for her hand, and therefore it would be premature to mention his name; but I may say that he is heir to one of the richest earldoms in England, and in other respects quite unexceptionable."

"I am to understand, then, that your ladyship, for my ward, positively declines the Marquis of Ayrshire?"

"Believing that her affections are engaged elsewhere, and certainly knowing that his lordship would not be accepted, I think it would be needless to give any other answer," replied Lady Malcolm, "although we both must feel highly flattered by his lordship's preference."

Mr. Harcourt, failing to obtain any further information, soon after took his leave, and communicated the result of his interview with Lady Malcolm by letter to his lordship, whose annoyance and irritation at being rejected was so visible that his sister divined the cause.

"I guess the contents of the letter just delivered, George," she said—"a refusal from Miss Douglas."

"Yes, my dear Charlotte, it is indeed true, and I feel more chagrined and angry than pained, although I must confess to have taken a deeper interest in Miss Douglas than any girl I have ever known; but pray, for my reputation at the clubs, don't give a hint even to Arnmore about this business, and I will see Harcourt directly, and obtain his silence also. Were it known in fashionable circles, my travels must be resumed, as I should be the laughing-stock of half London. The fastidious Marquis rejected by a country girl! would be handed and bandied about by all the Lady Marys and Lady Fannys, rendering my presence here quite insupportable."

"Well, George, on my own account, as well as on yours, not a word shall escape my lips; but Lord Malcolm and his mother, how will you manage with them?"

"Oh, very well; Malcolm and I are old friends."

"And the young lady herself?"

"With her, I am quite safe; she has too much good sense and proper feeling ever to utter a word derogatory to any person, and notwithstanding my rejection, I must always esteem her."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

When Blanche returned from her ride, Lady Malcolm told her of Mr. Harcourt's visit, and the answer she had given him.

"Have I done right, my love, in peremptorily refusing the Marquis?"

"Oh, yes, dear Aunt Malcolm, I am so much obliged by your great kindness in saving me from a scene with Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt; but I am surprised at Lord Ayrshire addressing them on such a subject, after I have so frequently checked every advance he has made to a more intimate acquaintance. Indeed, the night of Mrs. Harcourt's ball, when making some allusion to my friends, I gave him distinctly to understand, in very plain language, that the Marquis of Ayrshire had never been considered by me one of that number."

"Well, my dear, you acted quite right in undeceiving him, and if he was wilfully blind, you cannot be blamed for leading him astray."

On the third evening after this communication, as they were all sitting together, with the dessert on the table, the butler entered the room, saying, "There is a man, my lord, in the hall, with a parcel, which he will not deliver to any one but your lordship."

"What the deuce does the fellow mean?" exclaimed Malcolm, springing up from his chair.

"I think he said, my lord, he was the guard of the Northern mail."

"Show him in here, then."

The man, entering with a low bow, said, "I am intrusted with a parcel to deliver only into the hands of Lord Malcolm, from Annandale Castle, who is to pay me a sovereign, and send back an answer by myself; as I shall be on the road again to-morrow morning by four o'clock."

"I am the person," replied Malcolm, "so sit down a moment in that chair, and here's something to wash the cobwebs out of your throat," placing a bottle of wine and a glass in his hands.

Tearing open the parcel, three letters appeared, all in Beauchamp's handwriting. "Here, aunt, and Blanche, one apiece for you, and the other for myself," the contents of which he hastily ran through, and then handing it to his mother, observed, "No ball-going to-night, my dear mother, as Con must be off."

"Who gave you the parcel, my man?" enquired Malcolm.

"A young gentleman at the Lodge gate gave it to my fellow-guard, my lord, and I think they called him Mr. or Lord Beauchamp, I won't be sure which; so if your lordship will be kind enough to send a receipt of the contents inside that same paper, I shall be glad, as I've got a cab waiting to go back into the City."

This was soon done by Malcolm writing a few lines and sealing up the parcel as before, which he handed to the guard, with a couple of sovereigns. "You will be sure this is delivered safe?"

"No fear of that, my lord, when sent by such paymasters—salve like this suits my complaint exactly, my lord;" with which, and a low bow to the ladies, the guard disappeared.

The purport of Beauchamp's three letters was the same—that the Earl of Annandale, having heard from him about his sister, was very desirous of seeing her, and had, to defray her expenses, insisted on sending her a draft on London for two hundred pounds. A postscript was added, in which Beauchamp advised her setting off immediately, as the poor old Earl was evidently declining very fast.

"Well, Con," exclaimed Malcolm, "we must leave at day-break to-morrow, if dear aunty will go with us?"

"Indeed I will, Charles, most gladly; so now, my dears, we had better at once prepare for our journey."

Beauchamp's letter to Blanche was very long and very affectionate, which caused her eyes to fill with tears as she handed it to Lady Malcolm, saying, "Dear aunt, you may judge now whether I ought to love him as I do."

Lady Malcolm took the letter with her to the drawing-room to read, whilst the two girls went up-stairs to make the necessary preparations. Beauchamp gave an account of their arrival at the castle, and the affecting meeting of his father and the old Earl, who had been great friends in early life. Then his scrutiny of himself, to see if he could discover any family likeness—his being made to sit down by his side and give a full description of his sister, with the Earl's impatience to have her sent for without delay; "and now, my own dear girl," continued Beauchamp, "I must finish this letter, reserving a description of the place to another day, and, in conclusion, I only add that, for your dear sake, I cannot forbear feeling elated at the prospect of that barrier being removed to our union, which, with your guardian's prejudices and worldly ideas, never could have been passed by Mr. William Beauchamp, although, on his own account, he would as soon remain plain Mr. Beauchamp to the end of his life than by one ambitious or avaricious thought do violence to his own feelings by desiring the death of the poor old Earl. He appears, though eccentric, very warm-hearted, and of a generous, noble mind, and it shall be my study to afford him every comfort and consolation which a young man may offer, during the short time which, I fear, remains to him of his now fast waning mortal career."

When Blanche descended to the drawing-room, Lady Malcolm returned the letter with the remark, "Were anything, my dear girl, wanting to confirm my high opinion of your lover's worth, the beautiful sentiments there expressed would be more than sufficient, and to convince me also that you cannot love him more than he deserves."

Malcolm, that evening, was more like a boy packing up on leaving school for the holidays, and Aunt Gordon was obliged several times to reprove him for his levity.

"Well, but, aunty dear, who would not enjoy the prospect of a two hundred-mile journey, with four posters rattling along fourteen miles an hour, and all the expenses paid—the fresh breezes fanning our faces as we whirl along? Oh! it will be quite delightful after the hot, dusty rides through the suburbs of this mighty, smoky Babylon—and the handling of some of those thundering big trout in the large lake before the castle! By Jove! aunty, but that will be fine fun, and supply her ladyship's table without sending to the fishmongers."

The next morning our travellers set out on their journey at five o'clock, and reached their destination the second evening. The old Earl was greatly pleased with Constance, and received Mrs. Gordon and Malcolm in the most friendly manner, and from that time the two ladies, from their gentle, unremitting attentions, became two ministering angels in his sight.

"Ah, my dear, kind friends," exclaimed the old man, a few days after their arrival, "how many happy years have I lost, by not being acquainted with you before, and all owing to my old-fashioned, crabbed habits, in living more like a hermit in his cell than a reasonable being."

Finding his end drawing near, the Earl sent for a legal adviser, and made great alterations in his will, appointing Mr. Beauchamp and his son sole executors, and bequeathing (after a few legacies to distant connections and his old domestics) the residue of his personal estate, amounting to upwards of two hundred thousand pounds in the funds, to Constance. William Beauchamp having become a great favourite, was sent for to the Earl's private room, to ascertain his views on particular points, and to be entrusted with some confidential communications.

"I wish to know, my young friend, your opinion how the services of my old faithful servants should be rewarded, and to see if your ideas agree with mine. The old housekeeper will want another home when I am gone."

"No, my lord," replied Beauchamp, "that she shall never require as long as she prefers remaining here. My father and myself will never dismiss one of your old favourites. The butler, housekeeper, head keeper, and gardener shall never leave their present situations, except at their own desire."

"But I have left each of them a hundred a-year after my decease."

"Well, my lord," replied Beauchamp, "I think they well deserve it; and should they prefer living by themselves, instead of occupying their present apartments in the castle (in which it is our wish to continue them), we will add another fifty pounds yearly to each, in the place of wages."

"Then, my dear boy, there are my old pets, horses, dogs, and I know not what, and the books and furniture in my own sitting-room, which I do not wish removed."

"All shall remain in their present position, my dear lord—even the sparrows at your window shall not be molested. But why trouble yourself with these harrowing details? for believe me, on the word of a true Beauchamp, every wish of your heart shall be religiously observed by my father and myself. Give me only your instructions, and they shall be carefully carried out."

"I am content, my dear boy, for I see in your face candour and kindness of disposition combined, and I will trust you implicitly."

"Thank you, my dear lord, for that confidence, which shall never be abused."

"One wish still remains ungratified, William—can it be realised?"

"If in my power, you have only to mention it."

"I long to see your future bride, of whom Constance and Mrs. Gordon have given me such a glowing description."

"You shall see her, by God's permission, as soon as horses can convey her to Annandale Castle; and I am sure Lord Malcolm will most willingly set out to London immediately for that purpose."

Malcolm, who enjoyed travelling, left by the mail that same night, and returned the third evening with Blanche, who was delighted to leave London, and join once more in the country all those she loved. As the old Earl, holding her hand in his, gazed on her lovely features and soft, beaming eyes, he exclaimed, "Your friends, my dear, have not done you justice—even their glowing description comes far short of the reality. Accept an old man's best thanks for complying with his last earthly wish, although it was not from mere curiosity alone I desired to see you here, and have occasioned you a long, tiresome journey."

"To afford you the least comfort or satisfaction, my lord, I would willingly have travelled twice that distance."

"Thank you, my dear, for that pretty speech, and now Mrs. Gordon will kindly show you to your room."

"Well, my dear boy," remarked the Earl, when she had left them, "you are one of the most fortunate men in the world to have secured the affections of that sweet, lovely girl."

"Indeed, my dear lord, she is far beyond my deserts, and I am most thankful and grateful for such a treasure."

"Yes, my boy, and so you ought to be, although in my opinion you both appear exactly suited to each other."

The next morning Blanche took a short stroll with Beauchamp before breakfast, and on returning with the colour mantling in her cheek, the old Earl appeared fascinated with her radiant beauty, and unable to withdraw his eyes from her face. He whispered to Mrs. Gordon, "Your dear, gentle niece looks like a being from a brighter sphere, with that angelic smile and dazzling complexion." The society of these cheerful guests gave a momentary impulse to the expiring energies of the aged peer, and for some days he appeared to be gaining strength. One morning he took Blanche to his private room, and unlocking an iron closet, showed her the family jewels, which had been deposited there since the death of the late countess.

"There, my dear girl, are diamonds and other precious stones, and valuable trinkets, which once belonged to my poor, dear, departed wife, and into your keeping I now entrust them, for which purpose I wished to see you here and give them into your own hands; there is an inventory, my love—we must assure ourselves that none are missing, so lay them out on the table."

"Indeed, my lord, I cannot accept your too munificent offer."

"And why not, my child?"

No answer was returned; but a deep blush overspread her face, suffusing her very brow, and her eyes were riveted on the ground.

"I know what is passing in your thoughts, my dear girl," added the Earl; "you are not yet Beauchamp's wife; but tell me truly, do you prefer another to him?"

"Oh! no, no, my lord—all my hopes of happiness are centred in him alone; but perhaps he may——"

"What, my child! prefer another to you? Does he, did he ever love any other but yourself?"

"Indeed, I believe he never has, my lord."

"Then rest assured, my dear child, he never can—for where would he find a second Blanche Douglas? so now do as I desire, and let us both compare the list with the contents."

"I will willingly assist you, my lord, in that work, if you desire; but in my present position, I trust you will pardon me for maintaining my purpose of declining to accept the family jewels."

"Well, child, I respect your delicacy, and will not press you further now, only assist me in my examination," which occupied them for some considerable time, the Earl noticing and commenting on the value of each ornament; and when all were found correct, and returned to the closet, the key was again offered to Blanche, who, with tears in her eyes, begged to be excused taking it.

"Indeed, my lord, I feel your kindness more than I possibly can express, and it pains me to refuse you; but I cannot overcome my repugnance to presume on a situation which, by some unforeseen event, perhaps may never be my lot to fill."

"Well, well, child," said the Earl, rather impatiently, "you have disappointed me in the pleasure I anticipated; but your Aunt Gordon will not refuse the trust I shall repose in her, and keep this key for you. So now give me your arm down-stairs, but not another word, unless you would distress me more than you have done already."

With Beauchamp and the ladies' assistance, the Earl had been enabled to walk up and down stairs, and after breakfast was generally wheeled in his easy garden chair about the lawn, which was several acres in extent, reaching down to the lake, over whose silvery surface some favourite swans (one nearly his equal in age) asserted their dignified supremacy, holding the other wild fowl in terror of their sway. A servant carried a small basket filled with corn and bread, with which his pets were fed from the Earl's own hand, and with Blanche and Constance on either side, his morning was thus spent; whilst the old squire, Malcolm, and Beauchamp rode about the country, visiting the farm-houses belonging to the domain. The reaction from this temporary excitement was soon, however, apparent to all, and the poor old man, becoming exhausted by his forced exertions, was, at the end of ten days after Blanche's arrival, obliged, from excessive weakness, to keep to his own apartment, which he was never again destined to leave; Mrs. Gordon and Beauchamp sitting and reading to him, by turns, portions of Scripture and religious books, from which he derived consolation and support.

The night in which he breathed his last, the aged Earl called the family to his bedside, and joining the hands of the two affianced couples together, invoked (like the patriarchs of olden times) a blessing on their heads. Taking then an affectionate and impressive leave of Mr. Beauchamp and Mrs. Gordon, he sank back on his pillow, exhausted of his last remaining strength, and continued in a state of stupor for some hours, William Beauchamp sitting by his bedside; his name was once more uttered in a low tone, scarcely above a whisper.

"I am here, my dear lord; do you want anything? Pray take this cordial to revive you."

"No, my dear boy; I have done with the things of this world. Oh! what will be the *next?*"

"A far more glorious one than this, where, by God's mercy, we shall all meet again, never more to part."

"William," he whispered, "I almost despair of reaching that better world."

"Oh! my dear lord," replied Beauchamp, in an impressive voice; "let not the Christian despair, who has God for his Father, Christ for his Saviour, and heaven for his home."

A smile for a moment stole over the attenuated features of the dying peer; his hold on Beauchamp's hand relaxed, and he fell asleep, to wake no more in this world of sorrow.

CHAPTER XL.

After the last sad rites had been paid to the deceased Earl, and his remains deposited in the family vault, Mrs. Gordon, with Constance, Blanche, and Malcolm, set out on their return to London, leaving Beauchamp and his father at the castle.

We must now take a retrospective view of what had been occurring in town since their hasty departure, which, of course, being soon known, created no little curiosity in fashionable circles, as well as amongst Blanche's admirers, to ascertain the cause of their sudden flight. But Lady Malcolm, at her son's desire, would afford no further information (neither would Fred Beauchamp) than that they had gone into the country for a few days, but would return again to town shortly; with which all were obliged to rest contented.

As Mrs. Harçourt was sitting at breakfast one morning, scanning the column in the *Morning Post* appropriated to births, marriages, and deaths, to which her attention was always first directed, as customary with many of her sex, she exclaimed:—

"Goodness, Mr. Harcourt; wonders will never cease. Only hear this:—

"'At Annandale Castle, the Earl of Annandale, in his ninety-sixth year. He is succeeded in his title and vast estates by Mr. Beauchamp, of Bampton House (now seventh Earl of Annandale), who, with his son and daughter, have been staying at the Castle for some time.'

"Impossible! this must be a hoax!"

"A hoax, my dear! Who do you think would put such a thing in print, unless it were true?"

"Oh! Selina Markham; just to annoy me."

"Pooh! nonsense! but now Lady Malcolm's mystery is explained—of her niece being attached to the heir of one of the richest earldoms in the kingdom—here he is—William Beauchamp: then Mrs. Gordon's departure with Constance and Blanche, following so soon after—why, the fact is, no doubt, they have all been staying at Annandale Castle."

"Well, I think it is unpardonable in Lady Malcolm and Mrs. Gordon keeping us in the dark so long."

"That is our own fault, my dear, for speaking so often in a derogatory tone of Mr. Beauchamp, who is a great favourite with both those ladies; and therefore they have kept the secret to themselves."

"Still, Mr. Harcourt, were he a duke, instead of Lord Beauchamp, as I suppose he must now be called, he shall never have my consent to marry my niece."

"You need not trouble yourself, my dear, as your consent is not necessary."

"Then yours, as her guardian, is; and if you have the spirit of a mouse, which I sometimes doubt, you will not submit to be insulted and despised in this barefaced manner."

"I must be guided by circumstances, Mrs. Harcourt, and do not intend to follow your example, by losing my temper when there is no occasion for it. You appear to forget all about the trial, and are blind to the fact that Mrs. Gordon is joint guardian with myself to Miss Douglas. What would my opposition be now worth, with Lady Malcolm's influence thrown into the scale against me? Nothing, Mrs. Harcourt; literally worse than nothing! I should, in that case, be insulted and despised to my face, as you are pleased to say I have been already."

"Oh, I see. You wish to curry favour with the ruling powers; and the Earl of Annandale is, of course, a very different person to the old fox-hunting Squire of Bampton."

"Undoubtedly, my dear, he is, as a peer of the realm; and Lord Beauchamp is now entitled to demand the hand of Miss Douglas. In short, the Lord Chancellor, if appealed to on the subject, would, without hesitation, give his approval to the marriage."

"I hate those Beauchamps, Mr. Harcourt—the son particularly, who has occasioned us such disgrace in that trial; and I had rather have seen Blanche Douglas Lord Vancourt's wife, bad as he was, than William Beauchamp's bride."

"You ought to be ashamed to express such feelings, whatever may be your secret thoughts, Mrs. Harcourt. Mr. Beauchamp behaved with great courage and forbearance throughout that unfortunate affair, and acted as I should myself."

"As you would, indeed; why, at the very sight of Lord Vancourt's pistol, you would have fallen into a fit."

"I shall not submit to your taunts a moment longer, madam," exclaimed her indignant husband, rising from his chair; "and if Lord Beauchamp were to become plain Mr. Beauchamp again to-morrow, he should marry my ward with my full consent;" saying which, he left the room in a furious passion.

The day after Lord Malcolm's return to London, he met Mr. Harcourt at his own door, when walking through Brook Street.

"Ah, my lord," exclaimed he, "I'm glad to see you in town again; we wondered where you had all gone to."

"Only a little trip into the North, my dear sir, which is the most delightful journey I ever made in my life; and something in your way, profitable, too."

"Oh, indeed, Malcolm; a little windfall—eh?"

"No, my dear sir; an uncommonly heavy one. What would you say to bagging two hundred thousand pounds?"

"Oh, you are joking, Malcolm; some of your usual fun, I suppose."

"Well, it is not a bad joke that my betrothed wife, now Lady Constance Beauchamp, has been left by the old peer just the sum I named—hard money in the funds."

"What! two hundred thousand pounds?"

"Yes, Mr. Harcourt, as certain as that you are standing in this street, with a few odds and ends besides. These were only his savings from the rents."

"Indeed, my dear Malcolm, I am rejoiced to hear of your good fortune. Then the present Earl, I conclude, has succeeded to something very considerable?"

"The rental, to my knowledge, exceeds fifty thousand a-year—so now, good morning, and pray give my compliments to Mrs. Harcourt with this pleasing intelligence about the penniless fox-hunting Beauchamp."

Nothing could exceed the surprise and delight of Lady Malcolm on learning from her son the magnificent bequest of the late Earl.

"Why, my dear child, how lovely you must have appeared in his eyes."

"She was kind and affectionate to the dear old man," replied Mrs. Gordon, "as she ever is to all who deserve her love."

"And, my dear Blanche—was he fond of her?"

"As she was of him; and he has given her all the family jewels, which she persisted in refusing, until she became entitled to them—so these are under my care at present."

"Which," said Lady Malcolm, "I hope will not be long. Well, my dear children, I am overjoyed at your good fortune; and now our gaiety must cease for a time, which I shall not in the least regret."

Lord Malcolm, who had passed hitherto as a poor Scotch nobleman, about to commit great folly in marrying a country squire's daughter, failed not to acquaint two or three of his most confidential friends with his intended wife's great accession of fortune, the news of which he knew would travel post haste through the clubs in London.

"Eh, demmit!" exclaimed the Captain to Lord Henry Bayntun, as he was lounging at the club window in St. James's Street, "that fellow Malcolm has picked up one worth having, after all—just two hundred thousand yellow boys—'pon honour, what a prize!"

"What do you mean, Markham?" inquired Lord Henry.

"That Lady Constance, Will Beauchamp's sister, has had that sum left her by the late Earl of Annandale, and she is engaged to Malcolm."

"I'll bet you a pony it is all chaff," replied Lord Henry.

"Done, Bayntun—make it fifty, or a hundred, if you like."

"No, a pony will do; but how is the bet to be decided?"

"Doctors' Commons, old fellow—read the will—no mistake there."

Lord Ayrshire, although experiencing great relief in the disappearance of Miss Douglas from the fashionable world after his rejection, could not suppress his curiosity, on meeting Lord Malcolm, to know the truth of the reports in circulation, and congratulated him on his good fortune. "You have kept things very close, Malcolm, between yourself and Miss Beauchamp, although I suspected how the case stood."

"You forget my warning in Tattersall's yard—that Miss Beauchamp was certainly bespoken, if not Miss Douglas also; but a 'wilfu' mon maun have his way,' as we say in Scotland, and had you followed my advice, you would have spared yourself the disagreeable necessity of being further enlightened on this matter."

"Oh, then, I suppose Mr. Harcourt has informed you what occurred in your absence?"

"No, Ayrshire, not a word has escaped Mr. Harcourt's lips, that I am aware of, on this subject; but Lady Malcolm has of course confided to me your proposal for my cousin, which you may feel assured will go no further."

"I thank you, Malcolm, for this kind consideration, as you know it would not be very agreeable to have this little affair going the round of the clubs. But may I know to whom your too lovely cousin is engaged, for such I am told is the case?"

"You expect me to keep your secret, Ayrshire, and ask me at the same time to reveal another's; is this consistent?"

"No, my dear fellow, obviously not; but my reason for inquiring is, that were the thing not definitively arranged, I should be disposed to renew my suit to the young lady herself."

"And that would unquestionably be attended with the same result," added Lord Malcolm; which at once put a stop to further questions.

The second morning after this explanation, while Mr. Harcourt was busily engaged reading the debates in the House of Commons, the footman brought in a card, saying the gentleman was waiting in the hall.

"Mangle!" exclaimed Mr. Harcourt; "I don't know any such person—why did you admit him?"

"He stepped in before I could shut the door, sir," replied the man, "although I said you were not at home."

"Most extraordinary conduct," muttered Mr. Harcourt, fussing and fuming with nervous trepidation; "but I suppose, my dear," turning to his wife, "I had better know what his business may be."

"Certainly, Mr. Harcourt, let him be shown in here."

A tall, portly man made his appearance, who, with a low bow, apologised for calling at such an unfashionable hour, alleging important business as his excuse. "My name is Mangle, sir," addressing Mr. Harcourt.

"So I presume, sir, by your card," replied that gentleman, turning as white as his own table-cloth.

"Of the old established firm of Mangle, Smasher, and Nibble, of Lincoln's Inn Fields."

Mr. Harcourt acknowledged this unsolicited information by a bow only, looking as if the whole of the respectable firm were at him already, tooth and nail.

"I conclude I have the honour of addressing Mr. Harcourt," resumed the lawyer, with an ill-suppressed smile of contempt at the nervous twitchings about his opponent's mouth, betraying unmistakable signs of terror.

"Well, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Harcourt, unable any longer to contain her indignation at her husband's pusillanimity, "and if he is Mr. Harcourt, what is your business with him? that I will thank you to explain as concisely as possible, sir."

"Mr. Harcourt is Miss Douglas's guardian, madam, I believe."

"Well, sir, what next?"

"Miss Douglas's father had an only brother, Archibald Douglas, who went out to India, and died there some years ago."

"Well, sir, that is no news to us."

"Very likely, madam; but I suppose it *is* news to you that he left an only son, who has just arrived in this country?"

"And is an illegitimate child, Mr. Mangle, which perhaps may be news to you, as Mr. Archibald Douglas was not legally married to the mother of his children until after the birth of his last child, which was a daughter—in short, sir, he never had a son."

"On that point, madam, I must beg to differ with you, as we have evidence to prove his marriage before the birth of his last child, and that child, madam, is Mr. Archibald Douglas, by whom we are instructed to take proceedings for the recovery of that property, to which, as male heir under the entail, he is most certainly entitled."

"Even were there such a person in existence, as you represent this gentleman to be," replied Mr. Harcourt, now gaining courage, "the property was entailed both in the male and female line to the descendants of the elder branch of the family, and therefore my niece is undoubtedly heiress at law, as the only child of Mr. Cameron Douglas."

"I think, sir, we shall be able to show that the deed of entail was not properly registered according to Scotch law, and is therefore invalid. But my present object, sir, in calling upon you, is to state that we have directed our agent in Scotland to serve notices on the tenants of the property, not to pay any more rents to yourself or any person on behalf of Miss Douglas; but as our client does not wish to press heavily on his cousin, I am further instructed to say, that if, on producing the evidence requisite to establish his claim, immediate possession of the estates is surrendered, he will forego his right to the reimbursement of the rents and profits received by you for her use since her father's decease."

"Very well, sir," replied Mr. Harcourt, writing his solicitors' address on a card; "these are the names of my legal advisers, to whom I must refer you for any further communication on this most extraordinary business;" hearing which, Mr. Mangle, with a stiff bow, made his exit.

CHAPTER XLI.

"A PLEASANT piece of intelligence, truly," exclaimed Mrs. Harcourt, when the door closed; "so we are to refund all the money we have received on account of that wilful, perverse girl, who would have married Lord Danby and been off our hands by this time, if you had exercised your authority as her guardian ought to have done, and not given way to her ridiculous fancies about love and such nonsense."

"You know very well, Mrs. Harcourt, I could not compel her to marry against her inclination; but as she is now under Mrs. Gordon's protection, I shall resign my guardianship in favour of that lady; that is, in the event of this young man establishing his claim to the property, or producing any documents likely to prove it; that is the course, my dear, I shall adopt."

"And a very wise one, too, Mr. Harcourt, and the sooner that is done the better."

"Well, my dear, I will order the carriage directly—go first into the City to see my solicitors, and prepare them for a visit from this Mr. Mangles, and then call in Grosvenor Square, to apprise Lady Malcolm and Mrs. Gordon of what has occurred."

The consternation of these two ladies, when informed by Mr. Harcourt that a claimant had arisen to dispute their niece's right to her father's property, may be imagined. They sat in mute astonishment and dismay, as that gentleman proceeded in his narrative; when, at its close, Mrs. Gordon exclaimed, "It is all a trick, Mr. Harcourt, a vile imposition, as my brother was never married to that woman until a few weeks previous to his death, and his youngest child, a daughter, was then two years old."

"But how can you prove this, Mrs. Gordon?—that is the question."

"By the servant who lived with him at the time, as nurs to his children, and afterwards returned to this country with the woman he had made his wife."

"And where is she to be found, Mrs. Gordon?"

"Somewhere in Scotland; but where I cannot tell, although two years ago she wrote to me for money, which I sent to the address she gave me—Janet Maclean, Stranraer."

"Then, Mrs. Gordon, it is necessary to ascertain without delay if this Janet Maclean still lives, and her place of abode, as she will be a most important witness, and on her evidence our chief dependence rests. If we can establish the fact that no child was born in wedlock, it is quite clear the man who calls himself Archibald Douglas is an impostor; but no time must be lost, as these solicitors, who have taken up this case, are notorious for being the greatest sharpers in London, and will cause an immensity of trouble."

After Mr. Harcourt's departure, Lord Malcolm returned from his usual ride with Blanche and Constance, and when told of Mr. Harcourt's revelations, his rage could scarcely be kept within bounds. "What!" he exclaimed, "be frightened by such an infamous trick as this? Where has been this Mr. Archibald Douglas for these last ten years, since the death of Blanche's father? I am not to be gulled or terrified, like that craven-hearted Harcourt, by such a trumped-up, improbable tale."

"It is, however, Charles, a serious business," replied Mrs. Gordon, "and we must prepare to meet the claim set up by these people, without delay or hesitation."

"That shall be done forthwith, aunt. I will go directly to my little ferret of a Scotch lawyer, in Gray's Inn, Macvittie, who is as sharp as a needle, and cannie as a true Scot. Harcourt's solicitors are quiet, respectable men of business, with a good country connection, but too slow for such a case as this; so I will send Macvittie to help them, and sift these villanous pretensions to the smallest grain of evidence that can be produced."

Poor Blanche was so bewildered at first by this overwhelming intelligence, that she sat motionless in her chair, speechless and stunned by the heavy blow that had fallen so suddenly upon her, which her Aunt Gordon observing, led her away to her own room, on entering which she burst into tears.

"Oh! aunt, aunt," she exclaimed, "I am now, perhaps, a penniless orphan, dependent on your kind bounty, and as such can never become William's wife."

"My dear child, do not, I entreat you, give way to such dreadful anticipations, which I trust in heaven will never be realised; one at least never can, that, whether rich or poor, you will ever find any change in the affections of William Beauchamp."

"But, dear aunt, my first impulse is to release him from his engagement, which was formed under such different circumstances, that it ought and must now be cancelled."

"You are too hasty, my dear Blanche, in taking the claim so impudently advanced by these unprincipled people as a just and legal one; pray do nothing hastily, and promise me not to offer such an insult to William Beauchamp's love and high sense of honour, as you propose. We shall have the lawyer's opinion in a few days, and then it will be time enough to determine how we ought to act."

The next day, Mr. Mangle, having made an appointment with Mr. Harcourt's solicitors, which Macvittie attended, produced the alleged marriage certificate of Archibald Douglas and Susan Monkton, which Messrs. Boram and Teagle having carefully scanned, pronounced to be apparently an authentic document.

"So far then, so good," chuckled Mr. Mangle, "and we shall be prepared to prove by Mrs. Archibald Douglas, and other witnesses, the birth of a son, ten months after the date of this certificate, which I conclude will be quite sufficient to establish our claim."

"Not quite, I think," observed Mr. Teagle; "there are some other points to be considered."

"Pray may I be permitted to have a look at that little document?" inquired Macvittie, in the most insinuating manner.

"On whose behalf, sir?" demanded Mr. Mangle.

"Lord Malcolm, sir; Miss Douglas's cousin, who is interested in the family property, failing Miss Douglas."

"Oh, certainly," replied Mr. Mangle, "although I do not trust it out of my own hands."

"I do not covet it, my dear sir," replied Macvittie, adjusting his spectacles on his nose with great deliberation; "pray keep it in your own hand, which will do very well—just a trifle more to the light, my dear sir, as my eye-sight is rather dim. Thank you, that will do."

"Well, sir," asked Mr. Mangle, "you are also, I conclude, quite satisfied?"

"Yes, my dear sir, perfectly, that the little piece of paper in your hand is not worth a straw."

The countenance of Mangle at this announcement underwent a change, which the keen eye of Macvittie instantly detected. "Ah, my dear sir, very prettily executed, but——"

"What?" demanded Mr. Mangle, impetuously thrusting the paper into his side pocket.

"I do not attach any very great importance to your case, Mr. Mangle—that is all."

"Will you state your objections, then?"

"No, Mr. Mangle; I must decline doing so at present."

"Very well, gentlemen; then I must wish you good morning, and we shall at once proceed to trial."

On Mr. Mangle's departure, Teagle asked, "What flaw did you see in that paper, Macvittie? I could detect none whatever."

"The figure 5 has been altered into 3—and I am quite satisfied, by the change in his face, Mangle knows it. Yet it is so cleverly done, that not one man in a hundred would notice the very slight, almost imperceptible to the naked eye, difference in the colour of the ink."

"This after all is a very slender thread to build a framework upon," remarked Borum; "and if they bring forward witnesses to prove the marriage, and the birth of a son as well, we are done for."

"Ay, *if* they do," replied Macvittie, "that little word if will decide the case; but my impression is, they will not get over that alteration in the figure."

Scarcely had Macvittie turned the corner of Broad Street, in the City, where Borum and Teagle occupied spacious offices, than Mr. Harcourt drew up in his carriage, and was immediately shown into Mr. Borum's private room.

"Well, my good sir," began the lawyer, "we have had an interview with Mr. Mangle, who produces a marriage certificate, which Lord Malcolm's solicitor thinks has been tampered with, and altered in the date, although neither Mr. Teagle nor myself could discover any difference in the ink, or an erasure of any kind."

"Then, what is your opinion, Mr. Borum?"

"Rather doubtful, my good sir; and if they bring forward witnesses to prove the birth of a son, establishing his identity with this young man, we shall be out of court directly; still there is the point to be decided, whether Miss Douglas, under the entail, takes precedence of a male heir in the second branch of the family, or not."

"Do you advise me, then, Mr. Borum, to resign my guardianship at once to Mrs. Gordon?"

"That cannot help you, my good sir, as you are already liable for all rents received, as the acting guardian."

"Then I shall throw it into Chancery."

"Worse and worse, my good sir; that would be leaping from the frying-pan into the fire—expenses frightful! last for years perhaps; and still you might be held accountable for all the money you have received since the death of Miss Douglas's father."

"Compromise with these people, then?" suggested Mr. Harcourt, almost in despair.

"If Mrs. Gordon will consent to such a proposition, no doubt, my good sir, a compromise may be effected on very advantageous terms; Mangle and Co. are needy men, having very likely taken up this on speculation, and think one bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Still, my dear sir, we must not show the white feather too soon; they have great difficulties in their way, and we must maintain a bold front; Mr. Macvittie also is a clever, shrewd little man, and declares he will ferret out all their witnesses; so that, my good sir, we had better rest on our oars a little, and see what will turn up."

With this very unsatisfactory answer, Mr. Harcourt quitted Broad Street, perplexed and irresolute how to act; but before reaching Grosvenor Square, he had come to the conclusion that a compromise was the only thing to save money; and this he resolved to press on Mrs. Gordon and Lady Malcolm by every argument in his power. Finding both ladies at home, he gave the most unfavourable account of the interview with his lawyer, who, he said, strongly advised a compromise. "Only think, my dear madam," addressing Mrs. Gordon, "of our having to make good all the money expended on your niece's account, for which we are jointly liable."

"Excuse me, Mr. Harcourt, *you* only can be responsible for the appropriation of the rents, which you alone have received, without consulting me in any matter whatever relating to the property; but surely the expenditure has not exceeded one-third of the incomings?"

"You forget, Mrs. Gordon, we have taken a house in town, for the benefit of the best masters, several seasons in succession, which we should not have done on our own account; have kept extra horses and servants for her use, with an expensive governess also, who had a carriage at her command; not to mention dress and other necessary items. Then the outlay for repairs and draining on the property, with the agent's salary, has amounted to a large sum annually. But I shall be ready to give an account of my stewardship when required; the point for our present consideration is, whether we should not attempt to make terms with our opponents, before we are forced into a court of law, where all may be lost."

"We ought, first, Mr. Harcourt, to have the opinion of the best counsel, before making any overtures, and be guided by their advice. Lord Malcolm is gone to consult with his solicitor on these matters at my request, and I hope the case is not quite so desperate as you imagine."

"Well, my dear madam," said Mr. Harcourt, rising, "I shall be glad to know as soon as possible how you decide to act, although I anticipate almost certain defeat."

CHAPTER XLII.

BLANCHE, who had been present during the latter part of this controversy, after Mr. Harcourt had left, retired to her own room, and locking her door, sat down and wrote a few hurried lines to Beauchamp, acquainting him with what had occurred, and releasing him from his engagement to herself.

She had just sealed the letter, and given it to her maid to post herself, when Mrs. Gordon entered her room, telling her that Malcolm had returned with a very different story to Mr. Harcourt's, and wished to see her in the drawing-room; "so dry your tears; for, my dearest child, depend upon it, Mr. Harcourt has only been frightening us to serve his own purpose, in dread of having to refund all the money he has received."

Malcolm having repeated the conversation he had with Macvittie, and his opinion of the marriage certificate, turning to Blanche, said, "Now, my dear girl, I think Beauchamp will be offended if I do not write him all particulars, as in your present position he ought to be consulted as to our future proceedings."

"Our position is now so completely altered, dear Charles," replied Blanche, bursting into tears, "that I have already released him from his engagement, which I felt bound in honour to do."

"And when, my dear girl, did you write to tell Will Beauchamp that Blanche Douglas was no longer worthy of his love, because a rascally impostor had claimed her property?"

"This afternoon, Charles."

"Is the letter posted, my sensitive little cousin?"

"Yes, I gave it to Alice, to post herself."

"Well, my love, then you have saved me the trouble of using pen and ink; for if Beauchamp, on the receipt of that little billet doux, does not post up to London as fast as four horses can convey him, without stopping day or night, then, my love, I know nothing of his true character. I only trust he may not be thrown over by too much haste, and meet with some accident. Oh, Blanche, Blanche, how could you think so meanly of your noble-minded lover? Would you have released him, had he been so unfortunate as to lose all *his* property? Could *you* have ceased to love him?"

"Oh no, Charles—never; but as Lord Beauchamp, he will be expected to marry his equal in rank; at least, not a portionless girl like myself."

"Stuff and nonsense, Blanche! you are not a portionless girl, and never shall be, if I can prevent it, even if that old croaker Harcourt's prognostications are verified; as Constance and myself have resolved to place a hundred thousand pounds at your disposal, over which no person shall have any control but yourself."

"Indeed, Charles, although most grateful for your and dear Constance's kindness, it would degrade me in my own eyes to be the recipient of another's bounty, on which I have no claim."

"My dear girl, do not talk so inconsistently. Constance had no greater claim by affinity on the old peer than you have on me—not so great, and yet we do not feel degraded by accepting his legacy; what is the use of relations, if they do not love and help each other? They are bound to do so, my dear girl, by the law of God and the law of Nature; and you can no more turn me and Constance from our purpose, than you can turn this house upside down with those little hands. I have teased and tormented you, dear Blanche, in prosperity, and it is now my duty to comfort and support you in adversity; and if you should lose your patrimony, of which, in my opinion, there is not the least chance, Beauchamp shall not receive in my cousin a portionless bride; not another word of remonstrance, Blanche—(as she was again beginning to decline his offer)—if you love me; you know my obstinate disposition, and in this I will have my way."

"But, my dear Charles——"

"But, my dear Blanche, I must now wish you good morning, and mind you don't fret any more;" and Malcolm, taking up his hat, left the room.

Notwithstanding the remonstrances of Mrs. Gordon, and entreaties of Constance, Blanche could not be prevailed on to accept her cousin's generous offer; and her aunt, forbearing to harass her further on this painful subject, concluded the conversation by expressing her hopes that she might not be placed under the necessity of offending her cousin by a refusal. "The contingency will not, I trust, ever arrive, my dear girl; and, in the meantime, pray raise no further objection to Charles."

There was another point upon which she was equally resolved to break off her engagement with Beauchamp, and she implored her aunt to spare her the agony of an interview with him, should he arrive in London. Four days had now passed; Blanche, from distress of mind and excessive agitation, became restless and nervous to an alarming degree; she could scarcely be prevailed upon to touch anything either at breakfast or dinner; she would see no one but her immediate relations, and sat for hours together in her own room, in dread of Beauchamp's arrival. "Oh, dear aunt," she exclaimed on the fourth evening, "why does he not come? what can have detained him? Oh, how I wish your sad interview with him was over; I shall feel more resigned when that is past; I shall indeed, aunt."

"I fear not, my poor child, and dread your sinking into hopeless despondency; and he, poor fellow! what misery awaits him!"

At this moment, a loud knock at the door reverberated through the hall, on which Blanche sprang from her chair: "Oh, aunt, he is come, that is his knock; pray, be quick, and return to me as soon as possible."

Mrs. Gordon descended to the drawing-room, where, pale and haggard, stood Beauchamp, talking to Lady Malcolm and his sister. At her entrance he turned quickly round, and grasping her hand, inquired hastily, "Where is Blanche?"

"In her own room, dear William, and I am sorry to say, so very unwell that I fear you cannot see her."

"Then, if not now, I can see her to-morrow morning?"

Mrs. Gordon was silent.

"Does she refuse to see me at all, then?" he exclaimed, in amazement.

"It is even so, dear William; but come with me into the other room, and I will tell you what I am commissioned to say."

In vain Mrs. Gordon urged all her niece's arguments to avoid an interview which would be so painful to both; in vain she spoke of their altered position, and Blanche's resolution to break off her engagement, unless she was restored to her rightful inheritance.

Beauchamp paced up and down the room, in a state of mind bordering on distraction, for some few moments, then confronting Mrs. Gordon, said, in a firm tone, "Cease, cease, dear aunt, this mockery of my woe, and go tell Blanche Douglas from me, that I will not quit this roof until I have a refusal from her own lips, see her, I must and will, this very night."

Mrs. Gordon still attempting to dissuade him from his purpose, he frantically exclaimed: "Go, dear aunt, this moment, and tell Blanche, if she will not see me now, we shall never in this world meet again."

"Well, then, if I bring her down with me, promise to be more calm, for she is in a dreadfully nervous state."

"Yes, aunt, I will be calm; but, mind, see her I will once more."

Mrs. Gordon having explained the state in which she had left her lover, and telling Blanche what she dreaded from his words, prevailed on her to see him, and she entered the room in which he was still pacing to and fro, leaning on her aunt's arm, trembling and almost fainting from agitation and exhaustion.

Beauchamp advanced to meet her, and seeing her almost sinking, caught her in his arms, saying, "Come, dear Blanche, come to my heart once more, even if it be for the last time;" and she fell nearly senseless on his breast, sobbing convulsively.

"Hush, hush! my own dear girl," he murmured; "still that beating heart—you are mine once more—mine now and for ever!"

"Oh, no, dear William, it cannot be—pray release me."

"No, Blanche, never until you promise to become my wife, or you will never see me alive again; my arm shall hold you till you tear it from your side; so now, my love, let me lead you to the sofa, and listen calmly to what I have to say. Do you see that ring on my finger, dear girl, placed there by your own hand, with the vow that by that symbol you would be mine for ever."

"Yes, William, I remember it well—the past is a happy dream, the present a sad reality. I never thought then how different our positions might become; but still my vow remains unaltered—I will never marry another."

"To that I cannot, will not hold you, dear Blanche; take the ring from my finger, and take with it all my hopes of earthly happiness."

"That I cannot do, William."

"Then listen to reason, Blanche; at least, you ought to be consistent. When you placed that ring upon my finger, you were a rich heiress, and I (by Mrs. Harcourt's account) a poor, penniless fox-hunter; you would have married me then, could I have obtained your guardian's consent."

"Yes, William, indeed I would."

"And should I have been degraded in your eyes by accepting your hand, although then represented to you without fortune?"

"Oh, no, dearest William; nothing could ever degrade you in my sight."

"Our positions now, dear girl, are apparently, but not really reversed, and Blanche Douglas is too proud to make that concession she expected of William Beauchamp. Yes, that is the fact. I might and must have been humbled then in your opinion, and now your false sense of honour would trample all my feelings and fondly cherished expectations in the dust."

"No, William; the time may arrive when I will no longer oppose your wishes; but should all be lost to me, I shall ever love and esteem you as my own dear brother."

"Will nothing change your purpose, Blanche? Will no feeling of compassion or compunction induce you to avert my doom?"

"Do not urge me further, dear William, in pity to my agony of mind and dreadful sufferings these last few days. Oh, spare me the misery of listening to your reproaches, which, believe me, I do not deserve—we may meet again as before—as brother and sister."

"Never, Blanche, that time is past. Now hear the sentence you have pronounced; if we part now, we never meet again, for I will leave my native land, and return to it no more, unless this night you promise to be mine."

"Oh, William, recall that rash vow; think of your poor father, who would be broken-hearted if you left him; think of your sister, and dear Aunt Gordon."

"It is too late, Blanche; I have sworn to do so, and will keep my oath. You have forced me in despair to utter these hasty words; your false pride will entail this misery on us all."

It was now Blanche's turn to beg and implore her lover to alter his determination; but her voice fell unheeded on his ear, and leaning his head on his hand, he seemed lost in thought, and deaf to her entreaties.

'Oh, William," she exclaimed, "why will you not speak to me? only say you will not go."

"Go, yes, I know I must go," he muttered, without regarding her; "Blanche Douglas sends me forth an outcast from my home, to die among strangers, scorned, despised, and neglected by her, for whom I would have sacrificed a hundred lives, had I them to give. Let me go," he cried, springing wildly from his seat, as she attempted to hold his hand. "I am crazed, maddened!" and seizing his hat, he was rushing from the room like one distracted, when Blanche threw herself in his way, and casting her arms round his neck, cried, "In mercy, speak to me, my own dear William, I am yours, now and for ever. Oh, say you will not leave me!"

At that appeal his pent-up feelings gave way, and as his tears fell on her neck, he murmured, "Oh, Blanche, Blanche, you have nearly killed me!"

"Forgive me, dear William, this once," she whispered, "I will never cause you another moment's pain;" and feeling him totter under her weight, she led him to the sofa, where he fell back exhausted on the cushion. She was kneeling by his side, fruitlessly endeavouring to rouse him from his stupor, when Mrs. Gordon entered. "Oh, aunt, aunt! I have killed him by my folly—what can I do?"

"Run, my love, for a glass of wine; he has only fainted from over-exhaustion, poor fellow, having travelled day and night since your letter reached him."

Blanche rushed down-stairs into the dining-room, and seizing a decanter and glass from table, flew like a fairy to her lover's rescue, who had begun to recover consciousness from Mrs. Gordon's application of salts. Blanche, trembling and shaking, poured half the bottle over her aunt's dress, then too intent on Beauchamp to notice it; and having succeeded in making him swallow half a glass of wine, she continued bathing his forehead with eau de Cologne, until he revived and tried to sit up.

"No, my dear boy, rest as you are a while longer, and drink some more wine—and there, I declare, that naughty child has spoilt my new dress—well, Blanche, to punish you, you must take my place now by William's side; but mind he does not move until I return."

Blanche silently placed her hand in his, and Beauchamp, knowing what that implied, asked—

"Is that mine, Blanche, without conditions of any kind?"

"Yes, my own dear William—your very own."

"Then give me a kiss to confirm your promise."

Leaning over him, she said—

"Will you forgive me?"

His reply was given by another warm embrace, when Mrs. Gordon appeared.

"Ah, William! you do not want me now, I suppose; but I will have no more scenes to-night—and here is Charles come to see you."

"Ah! my dear fellow," exclaimed Malcolm, taking his hand; "so Blanche has thrown you over at last—a regular back-fall. I thought how it would end with her ridiculous notions. She won't be satisfied, I suppose, till she has killed you outright; but how do you feel now, old fellow?"

"Much better, Malcolm, thank you, since taking that glass of wine."

"Then just take another, Beauchamp—or stay—a glass of brandy-and-water will do you more service, with a couple of biscuits. You are overdone—that's the fact; and, I dare say, have stopped neither to eat nor drink on the road since you left the Castle."

"That is true enough, Malcolm."

"Ay, ay, there it is—starving, fretting and travelling, without rest for two days, are quite enough to derange any fellow's digestive organs; and this backhanded blow from Blanche knocked you clean off your legs, old fellow. Well, my dear, obstinate, little cousin, it is lucky he is no worse; but don't try this game again, or you will have him in an apoplectic fit, my love, and that will be beyond our remedies. It's all your doing, Blanche—worrying, vexing, and tormenting him and yourself about these confounded rascals: why, what on earth is the difference between you—even if you had lost your money? (which you won't—a shilling of it.) When you were rich, you would have married him; and now he is rich, he would marry you. If Con had acted in this foolhardy manner, I should have thought her cracked; and I verily believe all this confounded business has turned your head, my dear girl; and that you will be in a raging fever to-morrow morning."

"Oh, Charles, pray spare me—I will never vex him again."

"That's right, my dear. Keep to that resolution, and all will be well; and now, give Beauchamp his glass of brandy-and-water, and make him eat a biscuit also."

CHAPTER XLIII.

MALCOLM'S anticipations were realised about his cousin, who was in a burning fever all night; and towards morning, becoming delirious, the family physician was sent for by Mrs. Gordon, who, with Constance, remained by her bedside, listening with tearful eyes to her ravings about her lover. Mrs. Gordon explained to the doctor what had occurred, as far as she deemed necessary, who prescribed the usual remedies in such cases, desiring she might be kept perfectly quiet, and no other person admitted to her room.

"But stay, my dear madam," as he was leaving; "if she should particularly desire to see Lord Beauchamp on regaining consciousness, let him be sent for directly, as his presence will go far to allay this feverish excitement."

After taking the medicine, Blanche fell into a fitful doze for two hours, from which, awaking with a sudden start, she exclaimed—

"Oh, aunt, he is gone—gone for ever; I sent him away never to return."

"No, my love, he is not gone; you have been wandering; he is still here, in this house."

"Oh, no, dear aunt; do not deceive me. I know he is gone."

"Then, my dear, promise to be calm and not speak, and you shall see him directly. Constance, will you call your brother?"

In a few seconds, Beauchamp was kneeling by her bedside, with her hand in his.

"You will not leave me, dear William," she murmured, "as you said you would; oh, promise me not to go."

"On my word of honour, my own dearest girl, I will never leave you more; but you must not talk now; so try to compose yourself, and remember I am always within call, if you want me."

"Oh, don't go, William," she still whispered.

"Keep my hand in yours, then, dear child, and I will sit by your bedside, if you will try to sleep; but you must not speak, or I will leave you."

Assured now of his presence, which calmed and soothed her troubled brain, she soon relapsed into a sound and refreshing sleep. Beauchamp sat gazing on her flushed face, and felt her burning hand and throbbing pulse. The tears chased each other down his cheek; and sinking noiselessly on his knees, he prayed long and fervently that God would be pleased to spare her life. "Hear me, O Father of all mercies—hear me!" he murmured; "and, of thy infinite goodness, grant that this dear child may be restored to me again!" when, overcome by emotion, and the excitement and fatigue of the last two days, with his face resting on the bed, he fell fast asleep by her he loved so dearly, his hand still firmly locked in hers.

Mrs. Gordon, who had been watching Beauchamp's actions, cautiously approached, and hearing his heavy breathing, whispered Constance, "Dear William has fallen asleep in that kneeling posture."

"Oh, let him alone, aunt; he is quite worn out, poor fellow, in mind and body."

For three hours, neither Blanche nor Beauchamp stirred, when Alice softly entered the room, whispering the doctor was coming up-stairs. Mrs. Gordon met him at the door, and placing her finger on her lips, in token of silence, pointed to the bed. The doctor crept on tiptoe to listen to his patient's breathing, and as noiselessly retreating, beckoned Mrs. Gordon out of the room. "That will do, my dear madam, better than all my medicine; pray don't disturb them."

Blanche was the first to awake, with all her faculties restored, and great was her astonishment on finding her lover's head resting by her side, in perfect unconsciousness. "Oh, aunt," was her sudden exclamation; "where am I?"

"In your own bed, my dear; but as you would have William's hand in yours, he has fallen asleep too, and, thank goodness, you have both slept soundly for these last three hours: so now, my love, if you will let him go, it is time you had a cup of tea, and he will not be sorry to have some breakfast."

From this time her fever began to abate, and in three days Blanche made her appearance once more in the drawing-room, and Beauchamp, thinking the present a most favourable opportunity for making his proposals for her hand, obtained her consent to apply to her guardian for his formal approval of their marriage. "Out of evil good often proceeds, dear Blanche," he observed, "and Mr. Harcourt may be induced now to give his consent, which, under different circumstances, he would have refused; for I believe he is so worried by the thought of being called on to refund the rents, that he will be too happy to shift any further responsibility off his own shoulders on to mine, or any man of substance you might select; and as you have promised never to turn restive again, you will, I trust, my own dearest Blanche, no longer hesitate to invest me with the title to defend your rights and protect you from all further annoyance. In me you shall ever find a true friend and brother, as well as husband, and all my energies shall be directed to promote your happiness."

"That, dear William, I can never doubt; and I quite agree with you that the present is a propitious time to obtain Mr. Harcourt's consent."

We must now relate what was passing elsewhere. The news of Miss Douglas's loss of fortune sped with the rapidity ill news is ever wont to travel with. Lord Henry Bayntun having ascertained the fact from Mr. Mangle, whom he had been consulting on some little affair of his own, and meeting Lord Ayrshire at his club, all the particulars were communicated to the marquis, at the conclusion of which recital Lord Henry observed, "A deuced lucky escape for you, Ayrshire."

"What do you allude to, Bayntun?"

"Oh, Danby thinks the heiress threw you over."

"Danby had better attend to his own affairs, Bayntun, and not meddle with other men's concerns; because *he* has been overturned, as you call it, I suppose he wishes to make it appear that I have had no better success; but who is his authority? That I shall expect to know, not choosing my name to go the round of all the clubs as a rejected man."

"Tut! tut! Ayrshire, don't flare up in that fashion. Danby merely expressed that as his opinion; for he said he had tried to ascertain whether you had proposed or not, from Malcolm, who refused to give him any information; so it is merely conjecture on his part."

"Very likely, Bayntun; but I shall be obliged by your telling him, with my compliments, to keep his conjectures to himself for the future. You know, when I set my mind on buying a horse, price will not stop me; and if I should bid for a woman, the chances are in my favour, I think; eh, Bayntun?"

"Oh, of course, we all know that your rent-roll is as long as this room; but you would not marry a girl without any fortune at all, would you?"

"That would make no difference to me, if, in all other respects, she comes up to my standard."

"Oh, very well; then I conclude the heiress may be had now for asking, as Mangle tells me old Harcourt is in a proper funk about refunding all the money he has received."

This last piece of information suggested an idea to the marquis, who, taking his hat, wished Lord Henry good morning. With all his refinement of manners and agreeable conversation, Lord Ayrshire possessed a proud, haughty temper, and he could ill endure being foiled in anything he undertook, or being outdone or outbid by any other man. If he had set his mind on purchasing a horse at Tattersall's, every one was aware, who knew him, that it was mere waste of time to bid against him. Yet he was, from this peculiarity of temper, most wofully imposed upon, and horses were run up to three or four times their value by some of the knowing ones, just, as Lord Henry said, "to make him open his mouth." There was a manifest impatience in his mode of advancing against any other competitor, which at once betrayed this impatience of temper, as if no other man had a right to make an offer for the animal on which the Marquis of Ayrshire had once set his affections. One day, a remarkably fine, well-bred brougham horse was brought to the hammer, which immediately catching his lordship's eye, he inquired his age.

"Six years old, my lord," replied Mr. Tattersall; "high stepper—nearly thorough-bred; what shall I say, my lord? a hundred? thank you, my lord; trot him down; take care, gentlemen. One hundred guineas are offered for that splendid animal—and ten—thank you, sir; a hundred and ten guineas.

"Make it fefty* at once, gentlemen."

"Thank you, my lord—one hundred and fefty guineas are bid; will any gentleman advance on that sum?"

"Twenty," from a voice near.

"One hundred and seventy are offered—going at that figure."

"Two hundred," exclaimed Lord Ayrshire.

"Thank you, my lord. Two hundred guineas are bid—

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* The old Mr. Tattersall always pronounced it so.

going at that price — going, gentlemen, for two hundred guineas—will nobody advance?—for the last time, going at two hundred guineas"—a pause for a moment, and the hammer fell.

"Well, Ayrshire," exclaimed Lord Henry, "you would have that *dark* bay, notwithstanding my hints not to buy him."

"I call him a *light* bay horse, Bayntun."

"Very likely—doctors differ; but I'll bet a pony, notwithstanding, he is a *dark* bay."

"How so, Bayntun? you want your spectacles this morning."

"More likely you want yours, Ayrshire, for the horse you have just bought is as blind as a bat, or will be so very shortly."

"I don't care if he is," replied the marquis, impatiently; "having resolved that fellow who bid against me should not have him, for his insolence in running him up."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Lord Henry; "done, my lord, done brown, as well as bay; that was only a puffer."

This little anecdote will suffice to show the animus by which the marquis was actuated, when any one or anything ran counter to his determination. We must now follow him from the club-house, after his conversation with Lord Henry Bayntun, and reveal what was passing in his mind, as he took his way direct to Upper Brook Street. His thoughts were bent on redeeming the prestige he had lost by being set down as a rejected man, and knowing Mr. Harcourt's weak points, he resolved to re-open the negotiation about his ward. "It is not the question whether her affections are wholly mine or not," he muttered, as he rode along; "that with me is now quite a secondary consideration; but having committed the error of proposing, and rendered myself conspicuous by paying her more attention than I ever did any other woman, she shall be mine at any cost, if possible, and when once my wife, she may repent her waywardness in declining my first overtures."

As drowning men will catch at straws, so Mr. Harcourt caught at Lord Ayrshire's proposition, to bear the brunt of the trial, and make good any deficiencies that could be legally claimed, on the condition that he obtained the consent of his ward to become Lord Ayrshire's wife. "I do not believe," replied that worthy gentleman, "your lordship will incur much risk, as counsel's opinion is decidedly in our favour, and possession is nine points of the law. But if you are really serious in the matter, and choose to take the lady with her liabilities and rights, as they stand, I will use all my influence with Lady

Malcolm and Mrs. Gordon to effect your object, although I fear there may be still one obstacle in our way."

"And what is that, my dear sir?"

"The same that I mentioned before—some prior attachment."

"That I do not think of much moment just now, as I believe few men, if any, would marry Miss Douglas under her present circumstances. Why, my dear sir, it would ruin any man of moderate fortune, if her cause were lost. But to save my credit in the fashionable world, I will take my chance, as I never can endure to be beaten, Mr. Harcourt; and cost what it may, I am resolved to marry your ward, now that I have gone so far."

"Very well, my lord, then I think a little memorandum may be as well drawn up between us, just a few lines."

"Oh, certainly, my dear sir; pray write down what you think necessary, and I will sign the paper."

Mr. Harcourt, being what is called a shrewd man of business (which means, in plain language, one who will take advantage of any weakness or blindness in his neighbour to drive a good bargain for himself), took care so to word this little document, that all responsibilities, past, present, and to come, incurred by himself, and the refunding of all rents received since her father's death, on his ward's account, should devolve on Lord Ayrshire's shoulders.

The marquis having hastily scanned the contents, signed the paper; and rising, said, "Now, my dear sir, I rely entirely on your honour to keep this arrangement a profound secret."

"Of course, my lord; on my own account only I should never mention it, or our plans would at once be defeated."

Mr. Harcourt had just carefully deposited this little document in his writing-desk, when the servant entered with Lord Beauchamp's card, saying his lordship wished to see him a few minutes alone.

"Show Lord Beauchamp into my private room," was the reply; and in a few moments Beauchamp was receiving the warm congratulations of his *soi-disant* friend, which were estimated at their full value. Circumlocution or evasion being equally distasteful to Beauchamp's mind, the purport of his visit was soon explained, and his intention avowed, of settling the whole of Blanche's fortune on herself, as well as a very handsome addition from his own. "In fact, Mr. Harcourt, you must be aware that I am actuated by no *mercenary motives now*, in asking for the hand of your ward."

"Oh, quite so, my dear Beauchamp; but how long is it, may I ask, that you have been so attached to Blanche? a long time, I suspect, Beauchamp, eh? or at least, she has, I think, been to you."

"Then, dear sir, there is a greater prospect of our being happy together."

"Well, my young friend, I have no objection to yourself; but there are grave objections in your way. This suit, which may deprive her of all her property, and then the responsibilities you would incur as her husband. All these things should be well considered; and in your present position, your father, no doubt, will expect you to marry a woman of fortune or rank equal to your own."

"All these objections, with ten times more, will not alter my determination, provided you will consent to our union," he replied.

"As the husband of Miss Douglas, you may be called upon to refund all the rents received, my dear Beauchamp, which would amount to a large sum indeed. Are your funds sufficient, without crippling your income, to meet such a demand? This is really a most serious responsibility, and my advice to you, as an old friend, is, to give up all thoughts of marrying under such adverse circumstances."

"The rental of property which has already been made over to me by my father, Mr. Harcourt, exceeds twenty-five thousand a year, besides ready money; and if you require to see the deed, with the rent-roll, it shall be produced for your satisfaction; but on my word, as a gentleman, this is strictly true, and that has never yet been questioned by any man."

"Oh, that is quite sufficient, my dear young friend; and if my ward is really attached to you——"

"Of which, dear sir, there can be no doubt, since she has accepted and referred me to you."

"Then, my dear Beauchamp, I have no further objection to urge, except that in taking her, you must also take all her liabilities upon yourself."

"Most willingly, my dear sir, were they twice as great."

Mr. Harcourt then suggested he should sign a little memorandum to that effect, which was worded in similar terms to that he had produced for Lord Ayrshire, and having called in the butler to witness Beauchamp's signature to this document, he was about to lead the way to the drawing-room, when Beauchamp interposed, "You have forgotten to give me your written consent, my dear sir, which will ratify the bargain on both sides; and if you will lend your pen a moment, I will trace a few lines which you can sign." Appearing not to notice Mr. Harcourt's evident annoyance at this request, Beauchamp wrote a few lines, by which, among other things, Mr. Harcourt gave his full, unconditional consent to the marriage of his ward with Lord Beauchamp, and resigned all right and control over her person, goods, and chattels, from that day, in favour of her affianced husband.

"Rather stringent conditions, Beauchamp," he observed, on reading them.

"Not half so stringent as yours, my dear sir."

"Oh! very well, give me the pen; I can resign her safely to your care."

"Yes, that you certainly may, as we have always regarded each other from childhood as brother and sister; and now, my dear sir," placing the paper in his pocket, "as I have a pressing engagement just now, I will call on Mrs. Harcourt another day."

Beauchamp hastened directly to Blanche, who was impatiently awaiting his return, and catching her in his arms, exclaimed, "Now you are indeed my very own dear Blanche! I have your guardian's consent, my love, at last, and here it is in writing," producing the paper from his pocket; "there, Blanche, read that precious document, conveying yourself, goods and chattels, over to my sole keeping. Well, child, is not that doing business in Harcourt's own style? He did not half like the conditions, yet I made him sign them."

"But I fear, William, he made you sign something too?"

"Yes, my love, he did, by which I have taken all the responsibility of this suit, and rejoiced am I to get the control of these matters into my own hands, or he and his lawyer, Borum, would have sacrificed your rights to their blundering. Now, my dear, darling girl, I am the happiest fellow in existence, and you shall sing me that song this evening; 'Oh, leave the gay and festive scene!' Yes, my love, we will leave this murky atmosphere, and be off to the dear old Priory again."

"Oh, when shall we go, dear William? I shall be so delighted to be in the country once more."

"Then you do not wish to attend any more gay balls, or even have another night at the opera?"

"No, no—I am tired to death almost of dissipation."

"And won't you miss that gay throng of courtiers and admirers, who declared they could exist only in the sunshine of your smiles?"

"Fulsome flatterers all, dear William; my love and smiles are for you only, and I never wish to see London again."

"Well, then, my love, run off to Aunt Gordon, and ask her to prepare for leaving as soon as convenient to herself—the day after to-morrow, if possible."

All the party in Grosvenor Square were much amused, if not edified, with Beauchamp's description of his interview with Mr. Harcourt, and his beating about the bush to ascertain whether he had money enough to bear the brunt of the fight now pending; and Malcolm shook with laughter at the wording of the paper Beauchamp had induced him to sign.

"Why, my dear girl, old Harcourt, by this document, has assigned and made over to Beauchamp all his right and title in you, as if you were a floating cargo of goods or merchandise. What put it in your head, Beauchamp, to write all this down?"

"To make him ashamed of denying his bargain, if he ever felt inclined to do so, and to prevent his again interfering with that dear girl, of whom he has so often tried to make merchandise."

"Well, thank goodness, we are quit of him at last; and now, Beauchamp, if we don't *mangle* that rascally firm of Mangle and Co. it is our own fault."

"They shall have it, Malcolm, thick and threefold, and we will see Macvittie to-morrow."

CHAPTER XLIV.

The same evening, as Blanche was singing to Beauchamp, the door of the drawing-room opened, and, without being announced, the old squire, now Earl of Annandale, quietly walked in, taking them all by surprise. Constance sprang forward. "My dear, dear father," she exclaimed, and rushed into his arms. Blanche ceased singing, and rose to meet him, although with some hesitatian, which observing, he said, "Have I still another daughter?"

"Indeed you have, my dear father," she cried, and was instantly locked in his embrace. "You naughty, undutiful child!" murmured the old man, as he kissed her forehead, "how could you treat my dear boy so unkindly, by writing such a letter, which drove him nearly crazy?"

"Because I thought my loss of fortune might——"

"What, child! make him love you less?—Oh, Blanche! what a reflection on both our characters!—why, that is the very reason we should love you more, if possible, ten times more. But did you not promise once to love and regard me for ever as your own father?"

"Yes, indeed, and I do respect and love you with all the affection of a daughter."

"Then recollect, my dear child, that all your troubles and trials belong to me as well as yourself; we ought to have no divided feelings or interests. But I see, dear girl, by your pallid face, you have punished yourself as much as William. Come, Blanche, give me another kiss, and promise never to be guilty of such folly again." Pressing her to his heart once more, the old squire then turned to Lady Malcolm, whom he shook heartily by the hand, then to Mrs. Gordon, with whom he exchanged the most cordial greeting. We will now leave this once more united happy family, and follow Lord Ayrshire to his club, where he dined with Lord Henry Bayntun. The evening being sultry, an extra quantity of claret was required, which had the usual effect of inducing less restraint in Lord Ayrshire's conversation, who, after his interview with Mr. Harcourt, considering himself secure of the heiress, began to make more particular inquiries of his friend respecting Mr. Mangle and his client's pretensions to her fortune.

"The money is all right enough," replied Lord Henry, "as Mangle tells me the property now lets for ten thousand per annum, and, from his agent's report in Scotland, is certainly worth more."

"Well, but who is the man, or where to be found, who has set up this claim?"

"On that point, Ayrshire, my most particular friend, Mangle, is not disposed to be very communicative, as I pumped him pretty hard the other day without getting anything out; in fact, between ourselves, as Mangle is as arrant a scoundrel as ever swung at Newgate, I've an idea this is a bit of speculation of his own devising, and his client a man of straw. Otherwise, why should he refuse to give his address? I have been thinking this over, and tried him again this afternoon, with no better success. This looks deucedly suspicious, and my impression is that this rascal has got some deep scheme in his head, and by working on old Harcourt's timidity, thinks to frighten him into terms. Evidently he has the thing in his own hands, and this young Douglas is a nonentity—that's my opinion, Ayrshire."

"Not unlikely, Bayntun—then what do you think the fellow would take for his chance? would thirty thousand pounds choke him off?"

"At once, I should say, or perhaps less money, if he had a proper man to deal with."

"Well, Bayntun, as you know how to deal with these sharks, will you undertake to negotiate with them?"

"For whom?" inquired Lord Henry, with some surprise.

"Myself, Bayntun; for the fact is, I had an interview with Harcourt this morning, and I have signed an agreement to take all responsibility in this suit off his shoulders, and he has agreed I shall marry his ward."

"The deuce you have! why, that beats some of our little transactions on the turf all to nothing."

"Oh, it's all fair, Bayntun, and above-board—a *quid pro quo*—and you must allow I have, as far as money is concerned, the worst of the bargain."

"Egad, I'm not so sure of that, my dear fellow—the odds are greatly in your favour, and if you are obliged to give Mangle thirty thousand, you still clear an immense stake—it is a capital investment."

"Well, Bayntun, that may be the case or not; but although it did enter into my calculation to compromise with, or buy off, this pretender, yet the fact is, that this girl is precisely the person I have been looking out for a long time, to sit at the head of my table. She is well-bred, highly connected, of graceful and dignified deportment, a perfect lady in manners, and has passed through the ordeal of her first season in town without affectation of any kind, although so generally admired, and without exhibiting the least disposition to flirtation. I have watched her narrowly, Bayntun, and never could detect the slightest approach to levity in her conduct since the night of our first acquaintance; and the manner in which she has so quietly repulsed any too familiar advances from those puppies, who have been so constantly trying to ingratiate themselves into her favour, has excited my strongest admiration. In short, Bayntun, she is one in a thousand, and last, though not least in the opinion of most men, her features and form are perfection."

"I cannot gainsay a word you have spoken, Ayrshire, in regard to Miss Douglas; and if you obtain her fortune, or half of it even, with herself, you may think yourself a deuced lucky fellow."

"Well, Bayntun, between ourselves—and mind, it must go no further—if you can arrange this little affair with Mangle, at a reasonable rate, say thirty thousand, I will make you a present of a couple of thousands for your trouble."

"Agreed, Ayrshire, I will see him to-morrow morning as soon as he reaches his den; but are you quite sure of the young lady consenting to her guardian's bargain?"

"Oh, my dear fellow, not the least fear of that. Harcourt was to see her directly, and no doubt, under the influence of her aunts, Lady Malcolm and Mrs. Gordon, who will both urge her to comply with his wishes, I look upon it as a settled thing already; no girl of common sense or prudence could decline such an offer."

"Perhaps not; yet you have heard, I suppose, that although one man may lead a horse to water, two cannot make him drink; and this young filly may have a will of her own, as well as a love of her own."

"Pooh! nonsense, Bayntun; just now no man would come forward as I have done—the risk is too great, and the fancy of marrying for love is become quite out of date."

"Not quite, Ayrshire; however, I will attend to my part of the business early to-morrow, and meet you here at three o'clock. So now, good night."

At ten o'clock the next morning, Lord Henry drove to Lincoln's Inn, and found Mangle at home, with whom he at first entered on some affairs of his own, to allay any suspicions about the heiress's property, and was about leaving, when, taking his hat, Lord Henry said, in a careless tone, "Well, Mangle, I forgot to ask how you got on with old Harcourt; the news is all over town, and the heiress at rather a low figure in the betting world, there being long odds against her getting married this season."

"Ah, my lord, you are always thinking about your betting-book, instead of other matters; but I think Mr. Harcourt is pretty well satisfied by this time that our cause is a good one."

"Well, Mangle, I'll have a bet with you—an even five-and-twenty—you don't win the stakes, notwithstanding."

"Thank you, my lord, I am not a betting man."

"Say five then, Mangle—anything for a bet—shall I enter it in my log?" taking out his pocket-book.

"Oh, no, my lord, I really never bet at all—not even five shillings. I should lose my practice, were it known I was a betting man."

"Stuff and nonsense, Mangle; but come, if you won't do business in one line, you will, perhaps, in another. I'm in a speculative humour this morning, and want something on hand; so I'll buy your chance, if you will offer fair terms, out and out, and set up for the girl myself."

"But where, my lord, could you find the money, were I disposed to deal with you?"

"Oh, my friend Moses in the city, or some other old clothes man; but that's nothing to you, I'll find it somehow, if I can make fair terms—that is, to get paid for my trouble. Egad! it's not a bad spec."

"But the young lady, my lord?"

"We are on capital terms, Mangle, although I don't know much of Harcourt—that will follow: now for the price—what's the figure?"

"Well, you know, my lord, it can only be done with my client's consent; but, without prejudice, say a hundred thousand guineas."

"A hundred thousand devils, Mangle!—why, that's half the value of the property!"

"Not anything like it, my lord, with all the arrears."

"All chaff about the arrears, my worthy friend; and then, just look at your chance with Lord Malcolm, who swears he will take the matter out of Harcourt's hands, throw it into Chancery, and keep it there the next ten years, and carry it, if necessary, to the House of Lords. Your client must be a man of substance to stand this racket."

"Well, perhaps he is, my lord; but Lord Malcolm is reported not over rich."

"He is just on the point of marrying a young lady with two hundred thousand pounds—to my loss, I am sorry to say, having made a bet on the subject—so there's no mistake in that matter."

Mr. Mangle looking rather serious at this intelligence, Lord Henry said, "Come, Mangle, I'll take you at the odds laid last night at Brooks's—seven to one on Miss Douglas against the field; which means Mangle and Co., with their backer."

"You don't mean to say, my lord, that wagers are being publicly laid on this suit?"

"I do, though, my unsophisticated friend, and here," showing the entry in his book, "is my bet with Martingale, who offered it freely round the table—seven to one against Mangle and Co."

The lawyer looked aghast at this damnatory opinion of his case, and inquired how it was possible gentlemen on the turf could know anything of matters so entirely out of their province.

"We bet on every event, anything, everything that is discussed at the club," replied Lord Henry; "and we have fellows well paid, besides jockeys and trainers, to give us the information we require. *You* are in the market now, and the odds are increasing against you every day; first three, then five, now seven; and to-night, they say, ten to one will be offered on the heiress winning in a canter."

"Really, my lord, this is too bad."

"You can't help yourself, my worthy friend," replied Lord Henry; "but now I will make you an offer of thirty thousand pounds for your chance, money down."

"Indeed, my lord, we could not accept such a trifling sum."

"A fair offer, Mangle, well calculated, taking Chancery suit and all into account, with heavy damages to the losing party."

"To-morrow I shall offer only twenty," putting on his hat. "Is it a bargain or not? can't wait any longer."

"I will report your proposal to my client," replied Mr. Mangle, musing, "and you shall know his opinion to-morrow evening, say at four o'clock, if you call here."

We must now go back to see what has passed in Upper Brook Street, after Beauchamp's departure the preceding day. Mr. Harcourt, on repairing to the drawing-room, was interrogated by his spouse as to the purport of Lord Ayrshire's and Beauchamp's visit, who, having given a full explanation of his transactions with them, said exultingly, "Well, my dear, don't you think I have made a capital bargain, in getting rid of this responsibility on such easy terms?"

"By making a fool of the marquis, Mr. Harcourt."

"Oh, no, my dear; he has made a fool of himself by offering a second time, when I told him he had little chance of success. But it is quite a different affair with Beauchamp; there the thing is settled off at once, and I am now relieved from a load of care and apprehension."

"And the man I disliked above all others recognised as my niece's accepted husband, Mr. Harcourt; very complimentary, indeed, and consolatory to my feelings. He could not have married her for three years, at least, without your consent; *that*, out of deference to my wishes, you ought to have withheld."

"And saddled myself with about fifty thousand pounds in costs and arrears of rent, my dear; where could I have found the money? *That*, it seems has not entered into your calculation. Would you like to give up your carriage and horses, just to spite Beauchamp?"

"No, Mr. Harcourt, certainly not; but you might insist on her accepting Lord Ayrshire—or force Mrs. Gordon to bear the expenses."

"Pooh! nonsense, my dear; it is idle talking in that strain; it cannot be done. Lord Beauchamp has now become a man of consequence in our county, and it is our policy to be on good terms with him and his father; besides which, he used to be a favourite with you once, as well as myself, and has really done nothing to forfeit our good opinion. I never objected to the man, but his means; and as your niece will be raised to the rank you have desired so earnestly, it is perfectly absurd, my dear, raising any further objections. You have got what you coveted for your niece—rank and riches, with a magnificent place; Blanche has got the man she loved, and I have got out of my difficulties; so now, my dear, I can afford to make you a present of two hundred pounds (which he laid before her), to help to pay your milliner's bill, and purchase any little extras you require, before we leave London."

"Well, my love," replied the lady, quite mollified, "I dare say you have acted very wisely in this business, and if you are satisfied, I am content to submit to your decision."

Mr. Harcourt had only one more little unpleasantness to encounter, in his interview with the marquis, which was readily disposed of by informing him the next day, when he called, that his ward, Miss Douglas, had confessed her long attachment to Mr., now Lord Beauchamp, and declared her resolution to marry no other.

"But surely, Mr. Harcourt, Lord Beauchamp would not think of marrying Miss Douglas under existing circumstances?"

"Indeed, he does, my lord, and since our interview yesterday, has called here, and taken every responsibility on himself."

"And you, Mr. Harcourt, have given your consent to the marriage?"

"It was useless, my lord, my attempting to refuse it, as

Lord Beauchamp had obtained the consent of her other guardian, Mrs. Gordon."

"Oh, very well, sir," replied the Marquis, rising with great dignity and indignation; "then I have the honour to wish you good morning, sir;" and with head erect, he stalked fierecely out of the room, cursing Harcourt in his heart, as he walked down-stairs, for a mean, cowardly driveller. "D——n the fellow!" muttered Lord Ayrshire; "I saw by his quivering lip he had sold me, and would have laid my cane over his shoulders, but for the *exposé* of the whole affair, and that infernal paper I was fool enough to sign. Yet, confound the fellow, *that* I must recover at any rate;" and he turned quickly back for that purpose, and again entering the room, said, "I had forgotten, sir, a little document I was foolishly induced by you to sign yesterday."

"Oh, certainly, my lord; I will deliver it to you immediately;" taking it from his desk, and expressing his regret at not being able to carry out his lordship's wishes.

"I will thank you, Mr. Harcourt, notwithstanding, to observe your promise of secresy in this transaction, or the consequence may be as unpleasant to yourself as to me."

"Oh, certainly, my lord," replied Harcourt; "nothing which has occurred between us shall ever escape my lips."

"I hope not, sir, for your sake as well as my own," growled Lord Ayrshire, who, crumpling the paper in his hand, turned majestically to the door.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE marquis, furious at his rejection, and Mr. Harcourt's duplicity, was in no very complacent humour when he met Lord Henry three hours afterwards at his club; and he at once said he was so thoroughly disgusted with Harcourt's conduct in trying to make a Jew bargain with him, that he had declined having anything more to do with him.

"Then you have resigned all pretensions to Miss Douglas, Ayrshire? Is that fact?"

"Exactly, Bayntun."

"What, after the agreement you signed yesterday? How is this?"

"Harcourt would not stand to his terms; so I quashed the thing off-hand with that double-dealing old humbug."

"Then you have made an ass of me, Ayrshire, also, as I have seen Mangle on the matter, whom, I have no doubt, will accept your proposal for his client, and I am to call again in Lincoln's Inn this evening."

"It cannot be helped now, Bayntun, the thing is at an end."

"Not quite, Ayrshire; my part of the contract has been performed."

"Oh, I understand; we can talk of that another day, as I am in a great hurry now to keep an engagement, and my horse is waiting."

Lord Henry, nettled at this cool treatment, determined to find out more; and meeting Lord Malcolm soon after in the Park, asked some questions about his cousin, whether there was any truth in the report of her being engaged to Lord Ayrshire.

"Not the slightest," was the reply.

"Indeed, Malcolm, are you quite sure?"

"Positive, Bayntun; but who is your news-monger?"

"Well, what would you say to a hint from the man himself, that it was, or would be, the case without doubt."

"Do you mean to imply that Ayrshire told you he had been accepted by my cousin, Bayntun?"

There was no reply, but a knowing look and a provoking smile on his face, which at once rousing Lord Malcolm's temper, he hastily said:

"Lord Ayrshire was flatly refused by Miss Douglas, who has been engaged to my friend, Beauchamp, for the last six months, to my certain knowledge—there, Bayntun, I conclude that is plain enough, and strong enough to check any further idle boasting about her."

"Is the thing quite settled, Malcolm?"

"Quite so," was the reply; "and her guardian's consent obtained."

"What a fool Ayrshire has made of me, then," exclaimed Lord Henry; and, without hesitation, he related all that had occurred between them, and his interview with Mangle.

"Upon my word, Bayntun, this beats horse-dealing, with those two fellows bantering and bargaining for my cousin as if she was to be put up to auction, and knocked down to the highest bidder—confound it, sir, this is too bad; and I will expose their audacious proceedings to the world."

"Serve them both right, Malcolm—but don't be in too great a hurry—although Ayrshire has treated me very cavalierly also."

"Well, Bayntun, you may serve *us* now, so go, keep your appointment with that rascal, Mangle; and if you can pick out what you suspect, and I believe to be the case, that it is a trumped-up affair, by Jove! I'll give you the two thousand pounds, and engage Beauchamp shall give you two more."

"On your honour, Malcolm, are you in earnest?"

"On my oath, if necessary."

"Enough, old fellow, I'm off to Lincoln's Inn, and will meet you to-morrow at the club, at two o'clock."

There being a grand re-union that night at Lady Hasleton's, Lord Henry was there, and knowing his *penchant* for Miss Douglas, Lady Fanny Trimmer began bantering him on the sudden downfall of his idol. "What a fortunate escape for your lordship—and Ayrshire, after such very particular attentions, has altered his tone completely this evening—can't endure the name of Douglas now—ha, ha!"

"No wonder Ayrshire has changed his key," replied Lord Henry, "when he found all the notes in B flat."

"Rejected! Lord Henry, do you really mean to say he has been refused by that pretty little impostor?"

"She is no impostor," replied Lord Henry, indignantly; "but an impostor has laid claim to her property, to which he has no more right than I have; that fact has come to my knowledge this day; and as for Ayrshire and others sneering at and running down Miss Douglas now, it is because she has rejected half a score of them, at least, before a word was said about her loss of fortune."

"You astonish me, Lord Henry: refuse Ayrshire! impossible! What girl in her senses could commit such folly?"

"I suppose, then, when young ladies are in love, they *are* out of their senses, and, therefore, Miss Douglas, having been attached to Lord Beauchamp before she made her *débût* in the London world, has been mad enough to prefer him to all our gay men of *ton*."

"Gracious goodness! how romantic! and Lord Beauchamp really intends to marry her, notwithstanding this claim upon her property?"

"Yes," replied Lord Henry, "if she had not a shilling in the world, but I wish I were as secure of my bets as she is of her rights."

Lady Fanny Trimmer was not slow to communicate the intelligence received from Lord Henry to her numerous acquaintances; and the news spread quickly through the gay assembly that Lord Ayrshire had been rejected by the heiress. Sir John Martingale having experienced a similar check, which he attributed to the influence of the marquis, could not forbear expressing his satisfaction at his rival's discomfiture; and on meeting him, said, "So, Ayrshire, it seems you are on the wrong side of the post yourself, as well as one or two other men, in spite of all your jockeying to hustle and bustle them off the course."

"I don't comprehend you, Martingale?"

"Well, then, my lord, it is rumoured you have failed to induce Miss Douglas to become Marchioness of Ayrshire."

"And who, sir, has had the audacity to circulate such a report?" inquired the marquis, in a violent passion.

"It is all over the room, my lord, and no longer a secret."

"Your authority, sir?" demanded the marquis, imperiously.

That you shall have, my lord, if you will assert it is not true."

"That is nothing to the purpose, sir. I require your authority."

"I heard the news from Lady Fanny Trimmer, who was telling it openly," replied the baronet.

"The devil in petticoats!" muttered the marquis, as he turned away to find the wholesale retailer of scandal. But his worst fears were realised, when he was referred by that sarcastic lady to Lord Henry Bayntun, and the look of savage despair with which he received this unlooked-for disclosure from his quondam friend, confirmed Lady Fanny's impression that the report was perfectly true. "Ha! ha!" she laughed, as the marquis abruptly left her, without a word in return, "the arrow has pierced the bull's eye this time, and the fastidious marquis has fallen by the bow of a simple country maiden."

Not daring to question Lord Henry, whose pride and quick temper were equal to his own, for fear of a thorough *exposé* of his transactions with Harcourt, Lord Ayrshire quitted the room, and left London a few days after, on a continental tour, ridiculed by all his associates—regretted by none.

The next day, Malcolm held a long consultation with Lord Henry, who had prevailed on Mangle to accept the thirty thousand pounds in satisfaction of his client's claim.

"It's a hollow thing," said he; "and my impression is, we could catch this rascal out with a little more trouble."

"Well, Bayntun, if you do not regard the trouble, and can succeed with us in upsetting him altogether, Beauchamp and myself will double our stakes, and make you a present of ten thousand pounds, which I hope will set you straight."

"Will you, by Jove, Malcolm?"

"Yes, we will, indeed; and sign an agreement to that effect, if you require it."

"No, no, old fellow; I can trust your word and Beauchamp's—but a thought has struck me, which I think will help us a little to clear up this mystery. In Mangle's den—which, by the way, is a dark, gloomy room—there is a sham book-case, lettered outside with reports and law books, but hollow within, and the key generally left in the door of this closet, which contains only a few old dusty parchments. Now, as I know he will be absent to-morrow from two until four o'clock, I will take my tiger with me, who is a sharp, quick boy, smuggle him into the closet, whilst I write a few lines just to rouse him a little, and return for an answer in half-an-hour, leaving the boy, with the key inside, to hear the remarks Mangle makes on my letter, which I shall leave on the table."

"But suppose he should discover the boy?"

"Then the little rascal shall have his story all ready, to say he got there to overhear what his master and the lawyer were talking about; and a caning from me—which, of course, won't hurt him over much—but I shall watch my friend into his den, and allow him time only to read the letter."

"Well, Bayntun," replied Malcolm, "I must leave you to your own devices; so now, good-bye, as Beauchamp is waiting for me."

About half-past three the following day, Lord Henry drove in his cab to Lincoln's Inn, with his tiger behind, to whom he had previously given instructions how to act, and his training-groom inside, dressed as a gentleman, who held the reins, while Lord Henry alighted at Mangle's door, and going to the clerk's room, inquired if he had returned.

"No, my lord," was the reply; "but we expect him in at four o'clock."

"Very well," said Lord Henry, "I cannot wait now; but as I wish to see him on particular business, I will write a note in his room, and leave it on his table."

"Oh, certainly, my lord," showing him into his employer's sanctum, and placing writing materials before him, after which the clerk returned to his own business, and the boy, who had been standing outside the entrance watching his opportunity, slipped in unperceived, and was immediately ensconced in his hiding-place. The purport of Lord Henry's note was to propose an interview with Mr. Archibald Douglas, Mangle's supposed client, to come to a final arrangement the next afternoon at four o'clock, and that he would return for an answer in half an hour. Having finished his despatch, and whispering the boy to keep his ears open and his mouth shut, Lord Henry halloed to the clerk, saying he had left the note and would call again between four and five, and jumping into his cab, drove off towards the West End, where, leaving it with directions to his man to drive home, and return to the same place at five o'clock, he retraced his steps to Lincoln's Inn, and watched on the opposite side of the square until he saw Mangle re-enter his office. "That will do," muttered Lord Henry; "now ten minutes to allow him time to read my note, and I'll warrant, by his private ejaculations, Tom picks something out."

The boy experienced some queer sensations when he heard the lion bounce into his den, followed by the clerk, who said Lord Henry had been there writing a note, and would call again; but his terror was considerably increased when the lawyer attempted to open the book-case to deposit his bag."

"Where's the key, sir?" demanded Mangle of the clerk; "I left it here when I went out."

"Can't say, sir," replied the man; "perhaps you put it in your pocket."

"No, sir, I did not," retorted Mangle, "I never do," fumbling all the while to see if it were there.

"Well, sir, I heard you lock the door when you took out your bag, and perhaps you have dropped the key somewhere."

"I did no such thing, Mr. Scribble; but there, get along now, and mind you find it before you leave the office."

This little affair ruffled Mr. Mangle's excitable temper sufficiently to create an explosion on reading Lord Henry's note.

"What the devil does this blackleg of a lord want to see my client for? some sharping trick, I suppose—but there, that cock won't fight. Confound the fellow! he'd let the cat out of the bag, or sell me, perhaps, at once. Monkton is a keen rascal in some things, although a confounded ass in others, good-looking, and all that sort of thing; but my lord will be sure to catch him tripping—he's a deuced deep hand that Lord Henry, and would know a snob from a gentleman in the twinkling of his eye. No, no, it won't do, it won't do—but I must go down to Brompton this evening, and see what I can make of the fool—but confound it! here's Lord Henry," as his lordship halloed to the clerk to inquire if Mr. Mangle had returned.

"Yes, my lord, you will find him in his room."

"Halloa! Mangle," exclaimed Lord Henry, "put your hat on, a moment, and just walk with me to the end of the square, as I am all behind-time, horse taken ill, and obliged to send him home; we can walk and talk as well as sit and talk, so come along."

They had no sooner left the room than the boy emerged from his hiding-place, and recollecting the discussion about the key, locked the closet door again, and throwing it under Mangle's chair, slipped noiselessly from the apartment, and walked in a different direction to his master; but a sharp whistle, before he turned the corner of the square, satisfied Lord Henry that his tiger had escaped. That was all he required. Mangle fruitlessly endeavoured to shake Lord Henry's purpose of seeing his client. "Why surely, my lord," argued the lawyer, "his signature will be quite sufficient; what more can you require?"

"To see and know the man, Mangle, and witness with my own eyes his handwriting. Did any one ever hear of such a one-sided bargain as this, not to know, or even see, the principal you are dealing with? Come, come, Mangle, this won't do with men on the turf."

"Well, my lord, I will endeavour to meet your wishes; but I am not sure that Mr. Douglas is in London."

"Very well—then I must wait till he is," replied Lord Henry, "and now, good evening."

The tiger, seeing the coast clear of the lawyer, quickly joined his master, and told him what he had overheard Mangle muttering to himself on reading the note.

"By Jove! Tom, it's all right, just as I expected," exclaimed his lordship, "and your fortune is made, my boy, if things turn out as I believe they will. Now you go back into the square, to the elm trees, where you can keep your eye on Mangle's doorway—watch him like a cat at a mouse-hole, and if he leaves the office before I return, follow close on his heel, whether he takes omnibus or cab, to Brompton—mark the number of the house he calls at, and wait for me in the road, at the upper turning."

After giving these directions, Lord Henry went in search of a Bow Street officer, and having made him don his best, and look as little like a man of his calling as possible, they returned to Lincoln's Inn—but the boy was nowhere to be seen. They then walked into Holborn, got into a cab, and pulling down the blinds, drove to the Brompton road. Tom was on his post at the corner, and Lord Henry seeing him, pulled up, when the boy, running to the door whispered the number of the house which he said the lawyer had just left, and was walking towards his own home, which lay farther down the road. The cab was dismissed, and Lord Henry with his friend approached arm-in-arm to the house. On ringing the bell, the door was opened by a servant girl, who seeing a handsome-looking gentleman in Lord Henry (the officer having turned his back towards her), said she believed Mr. Monkton was at home; on which both entered the passage, and the door was closed.

"What name shall I say, sir?" asked the girl.

A friend's card being substituted for his own, Lord Henry was shown up-stairs into a back sitting-room, and a tall, rather genteel-looking young man came forward to meet him.

"Your name is Monkton, sir, I believe," said Lord Henry. A bow was returned only. "I wish to know," continued his lordship, "whether you are really Mr. Monkton or not, before entering on my business."

"My name is Monkton, sir."

"And I think you are acquainted with a friend of mine also, Mr. Mangle, of Lincoln's Inn," added Lord Henry.

An affirmative being given, Lord Henry proceeded, "you have assumed another name lately, Mr. Monkton, that of Douglas, and are attempting to set up a claim to the property of Miss Douglas, in Scotland, on the plea of being her cousin." The eyes of Lord Henry were riveted on Monkton's face (from which the Bow Street officer had never wandered since entering the room) and he turned pale during this address, his lips quivering with fear, when Lord Henry, reading guilt in his averted looks, suddenly exclaimed, "You are an impostor, sir." "And my prisoner," added the official, producing a pair of hand-cuffs. "I am a Bow Street officer, Mr. Monkton, *alias* Douglas, *alias* Jones; and I think, sir, I have had the pleasure of meeting you before."

In a moment the culprit fell on his knees before Lord Henry, begging and imploring not to be sent to prison, and he would reveal everything. "Indeed, sir, I have been put up to this by Mangle, indeed I have, and will tell you the whole plot if you will only spare me."

"You are a d——d rascal!" exclaimed Lord Henry, "and deserve to be transported; but what shall we do, Forrester?"

"Cage him, my lord, cage him, by all manner of means; he gave me the slip once before in a little swindling affair—'tis the same youngster, I verily believe."

"Oh, no, sir; indeed I never saw you before in my life, to the best of my recollection."

"Which seems to be werry bad, young gentleman," replied Forrester. "It wants brushing up a little; you'll soon remember something more, when we have a quiet chat in the lock-up to-night. But stay a moment, just let me have a look at my memorandum book. 'Mark M. on left arm;'" and, without ceremony, pulling up the young man's sleeve, "Here it is, my lord," exclaimed the officer, "right as a trivet."

On this discovery, Monkton's appeals to Lord Henry for mercy were renewed, offering to make a full confession if he would only spare him being sent to prison.

"Then sit down and let us hear what you have to say first," replied his lordship, "and I will put it down on paper."

Monkton then made the following declaration: that his aunt, now Mrs. Douglas, but formerly Miss Monkton, had left England as the mistress of Mr. Douglas, to whom she had been married only a few weeks previous to his death, and when there remained no hopes of his recovery. That on her return to London she was advised to consult Mr. Mangle on the state of her affairs, and with the aid and advice of that worthy, a plot was concocted to substitute himself as her son instead of nephew, and alter the date of the marriage certificate to two years previous to the time of its being performed; and he, Monkton, was to be substituted by his aunt and another woman, as her son, born in wedlock, and, therefore, heir to the property.

"Very good indeed," said Forrester, when Monkton ceased speaking, "a very pretty little scheme; just the sort of thing to get a man's passage paid for him across the herring pool. Have you ever been in India, Mr. Monkton?" inquired Forrester.

"I don't remember being there, sir; perhaps I may, when very young."

"Oh, very likely, with your mamma," added the officer, laughing; "but it will be my business now to find out your birth, parentage, and education, young gentleman; and I rather think your worthy father fills a situation at the London Docks."

There was no reply.

"Is that true or not, you young rascal?" demanded Forrester.

"Oh, yes, sir," replied Monkton; "but my father knows nothing of this business, indeed he don't."

"Well, you young villain, I've got you now, safe enough; your father will perhaps lose his situation when this thing is made known, and you will be transported to a dead certainty. Now, my lord, I await your orders; time presses, and I must return."

"Then my decision is this: before I see Lord Malcolm, take this young gentleman with you to your own house, and keep him there until to-morrow at twelve o'clock, by which time I shall have Lord Malcolm's instructions how to act. Treat him well, and ascertain all about his family, his mother particularly, if she is still living, and where."

"Yes, my lord," replied Monkton, "my father and mother live together at 8, Dock Street."

"Very well, send for them to be at your house then, Forrester, to-morrow by twelve o'clock; but no communication before we arrive; and now, Mr. Monkton," said Lord Henry, "if you make a clean breast of the whole business, I will endeavour to persuade Lord Malcolm to deal leniently with you. Good night, Forrester, and mind your charge," and Lord Henry ran down stairs, slipping a half-crown into the girl's hand, got into a cab, and drove furiously to Grosvenor Square. The ladies had just left the dining room, when Lord Henry, without any ceremony, rushed in, exclaiming, "I have won my bet, Malcolm, and nabbed the impostor, Mr. Archibald Douglas, *alias* Monkton, *alias* Jones, and left him in old Forrester's clutches."

"Hurrah!" shouted Malcolm. "Thank God!" ejaculated the old earl. "Bravo!" cried Beauchamp, as Lord Henry proceeded in his story. "But you have not dined yet, Bayntun," the latter remarked.

"I never think of dinner, Beauchamp, when I've work on hand; but won't refuse some now;" which being immediately ordered, he succinctly related all that occurred since his interview with Mangle.

"Well done! capital! excellent!" was echoed by all; "a lawyer outwitted at last!"

The soup being placed on the table, Beauchamp ran up stairs to give Blanche the joyful intelligence, and taking her aside, whispered, "Can you bear good news, my dearest girl, as well as you have borne bad?"

"Oh, yes, dear William, I hope I can."

"Then our suspicions are verified, and the impostor who assumed your name is in custody."

"Thank Heaven, dear William!" she cried, falling into his arms and bursting into tears; "then I have not been a usurper of another's rights."

"No, my love; Lord Henry has unravelled the iniquitous plot got up by that villain, Mangle, and is now having some dinner below, whilst I ran up to tell you that you are the heiress still."

Lady Malcolm, Mrs. Gordon, and Constance now crowded round Beauchamp, kissing Blanche, and expressing their rapturous delight at the recovery of her fortune, whilst he was giving a more detailed account of Lord Henry's clever trick in catching the lawyer. Leaving the ladies to the enjoyment of mutual felicitations, Beauchamp descended to the dining-room, where Lord Henry, having quickly dispatched his dinner, was discussing with Malcolm, over their claret, the proceedings to be taken on the morrow; and it being finally arranged that Malcolm and Beauchamp should meet him the next day at Forrester's house, at twelve o'clock, Lord Henry soon after took his leave, saying he had engaged to attend the Duchess of B——'s grand re-union that evening.

CHAPTER XLVI.

Being fully enlisted on the Douglas side, Lord Henry astonished his friend Danby and others with his adventures of the day, and speaking in high terms of the Earl of Annandale and Beauchamp, said, "Father and son are both trumps, and have invited me to stay with them at Bampton the whole of next hunting season, and given me *carte blanche* to shoot over their property in the north, with quarters at the Castle whenever I like to go there."

"Deuced liberal, indeed," replied Sir John Martingale; "I wish you would introduce me, Bayntun, to Beauchamp."

"What! to try whether you could be more successful with Lady Beauchamp than you have been with Miss Douglas? No, indeed, my boy; your flirtations with young married women are too notorious already, and Beauchamp is very particular in these matters, although as warm and kind-hearted a fellow as ever breathed."

"Then it is all settled, Bayntun, that Miss Douglas is to become Lady Beauchamp?"

"Quite, Martingale, and Malcolm marries Beauchamp's sister, and two handsomer couples never stood at the altar."

"That's true enough, Bayntun, and I only wish I could stand in Beauchamp's shoes on that one morning."

"Ay, ay, Martingale, you are not singular in that wish; witness Danby, poor fellow, whom I do pity; but Ayrshire and others not. However, Beauchamp and Miss Douglas have been attached since boy and girl, so says Malcolm, and may the devil take the man who would part them—that's my opinion, Martingale;" with which Lord Henry turned away, and forthwith communicated to Lady Fanny Trimmer and other ladies whose jealousy of the heiress was well known, the not very gratifying information of her opponent's defeat and the capture of the impostor. Selina Markham alone rejoiced at her friend's re-establishment in her just rights, and remarked to Lord Henry, "Beauchamp is not quite the spooney I took him for, and verifies the old saying, 'that silent birds pick up most grubs.' Will has been running mute, like one of his cunning old hounds when the fox is sinking, and beaten the flashy town pack gloriously. Hurrah for the provincials; we shall have a jolly time of it this winter—hunt six days a week, with open house at Bampton. Balls and dinner parties without end. Won't you come down, Lord Henry, and see how we do things in our quiet country?"

"Not very quiet, I suspect, Miss Markham, if I am to judge by what I hear of your gaieties and hospitalities last winter; Danby says he enjoyed himself amazingly."

"Ah, yes, I dare say he did; but then he saw everything *couleur de rose*—every scene was one of enchantment to him, where Blanche was present."

"Ah, Miss Markham, Danby is deucedly cut up about that little affair; but he did not go the way to mend matters by playing the grandee over Beauchamp. Your sex are ever ready to avenge an insult offered to their favourites, and from the night of his purposely excluding Beauchamp from the last ball at Castleton House, Miss Douglas has scarcely noticed him; but for this piece of folly, he would have stood second favourite at least—certainly before Ayrshire; and my advice is never to throw away a chance, as the first favourite does not always come in a winner."

"But in a love-race is seldom a loser, Lord Henry, if the young lady has to decide herself."

"Then Miss Douglas, in your opinion, would neither have accepted Danby, Ayrshire, or any other, notwithstanding Harcourt's assertions to the contrary, and would have continued constant to Beauchamp until she became mistress of her own fortune?"

"Certainly, Lord Henry; 'still waters run deep,' and Blanche feels deeply, although her true character is not known to common acquaintances."

"Well, Miss Markham, she has made fools of many knowing hands this season."

"Or rather," replied Selina, "they have made fools of themselves, by choosing to assume that a young country girl must of necessity be such a simpleton as to be taken directly by their flattering, fulsome, fine speeches. We are not quite the Jenny Raws you are condescending enough to think us, my lord."

"So it appears, Miss Markham; and I'll bet a cool hundred Ayrshire does not forget the name of Douglas for these next ten years, if then. Well, that supercilious fool wanted a settler, and he has got one at last. Egad! all the women were at him like magpies round a tame hawk, when they found his wing had been clipped, and he bolted at once for the Continent. And you, Miss Markham, have, I fear, made sad havoc with some hearts also."

"Not with yours, my lord, I hope."

"Why, no, not exactly yet, Miss Markham; although, I must confess a little *penchant* was beginning to spring up, when I was informed you had decided on being an old man's darling."

"Well, my lord, if such were the case, that is far preferable to being a gambler's wife."

"Thank you for that compliment, Miss Markham."

"Which your impertinence called forth, Lord Henry; young gentlemen should not pry into the secrets of ladies' workboxes, where they may find needles which will prick their fingers."

"It is only what I deserved; but I hope we shall still be friends, and I will keep clear of the needles for the future, which I feel can prick confoundedly. But why call a lady's heart a workbox?"

"Because the heart lies in the chest; and an Italian friend of mine would persist in calling a pain in his chest a pain in his *box;* but this pain in his box was cured by marrying the lady who caused it."

"Well, Miss Markham, I have always heard matrimony was a specific cure for that tormenting malady called love."

"It may allay the unpleasant irritation attending it, without working a radical cure, Lord Henry, except in such cases as my friend, the Count's, whose disorder was of a most acute and highly inflammatory kind; but in a chronic disease of long standing, the patient seldom expects or hopes for a remedy; and now I think it is time for me to bid adieu to these fairy scenes and you, as we leave town to-morrow for Barton Court, where, probably, I may have the pleasure of seeing you, and showing you the way to clear a five-barred gate after the Bampton foxhounds."

"Nothing would delight me more than to follow such a leader," replied Lord Henry; "and if alive, I shall certainly avail myself of Beauchamp's kind invitation."

We must now look after our friend Mangle, who (having hired a lodging for Monkton in the Brompton Road, where he called twice daily in his way to and from his office, to watch his client, or rather tool, as well as his case), was struck dumb with astonishment the next morning by the information given him when calling, by the landlady, that his charge had been carried off the previous evening by a Bow Street officer.

"A Bôw Street officer, ma'am?" exclaimed Mangle, in bewilderment.

"Yes, sir, I did say a Bow Street officer; on a charge of forgery, sir; and ain't you ashamed of yourself, Mr. Mangle, to put a dirty fellow of that sort into a respectable widowed woman's house? It'll be my ruin, sir, palming a low vagabond like that off as a gentleman of fortune. It's a nasty blackguard trick; and although you may be a lawyer, I'll have the law of you for making my house a *sceptical* for thieves and pickpockets."

"Hold your clatter, you old beldame," cried Mangle, "it's false, I say—it's all a lie."

"It's all true, I say, you rapscallion of a man. I heard the fellow falling on his knees—cry for mercy—and confess all about it; he said that lawyer Mangle put him up to forging the deed, and my lord took it down on paper, and the man you call Monkton signed his name, and swore it was true every word, that was written."

"The devil he did!" exclaimed Mangle; "what a rascal! and who was the lord?"

"Can't say, Mr. Mangle, as I don't know and don't care; but he was called Lord Henry somebody."

"Hell and destruction!" muttered Mangle, as he rushed from the door and jumped into a cab that was passing; "it's all over with me!"

Returning to his house, the lawyer wrote a short note to his partners, telling them what had occurred, and that, in consequence, he should leave town for a short time, until the thing had blown over; and taking all the money he had in his strong box, he immediately started for America. At twelve o'clock the same morning, Malcolm and Beauchamp met Lord Henry at the private residence of the Bow Street officer, and found Mr. Monkton in a most communicative mood; and it was evident from this young gentleman's confessions, that Mangle was the originator and inventor of the plot, the alteration in the date of the marriage certificate being made by his own hand. Monkton's father and mother were also in attendance, both declaring they knew nothing of the business in which their son was implicated, as he had ceased to live with them for several months. The father implored Malcolm and Beauchamp not to prosecute his son, or he should most likely be dismissed from his employment in the docks. "Indeed, my lords," pleaded he, "the lad, although wilful and wayward sometimes, would never have imagined such a trick as this—he is only the dupe of that rascally lawyer."

"But your sister," replied Beauchamp, "is also concerned in this conspiracy. Where is she?"

"She has lived at Islington, my lord, since her return from India; but as she passes herself off for a lady now, we seldom meet, and she is too good, or too bad, for us humble people."

"Very well, Mr. Monkton," continued Beauchamp; "then I shall require you to go with me and Lord Malcolm to her residence, whilst your wife remains here until our return; your son will then swear to the statement he has made before a magistrate, and you must be bound over to produce him as a witness against Mangle, when required; do you agree to this proposal?"

"Yes, my lord, most willingly."

"Very well; then, Bayntun, will you be kind enough to await our return from Islington?"

This was readily assented to; and Beauchamp and Malcolm, with Monkton, drove directly to Islington, where they found Mrs. Douglas at home. Leaving Monkton below, they were ushered into her sitting-room, when Beauchamp thus addressed her—

"Your name is Douglas, I presume, madam?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

"You have set up a claim, I believe, to the property of Miss Douglas in Scotland, on behalf of a young man you call your son?"

"He *is* my son, sir, and I'll swear it—born in lawful wedlock; and Miss Douglas will soon be bundled out of her ill-gotten estates."

"You audacious woman!" exclaimed Beauchamp, in just indignation; "your plot is discovered, and this young scamp you would perjure yourself to prove your son, is now in custody, and his father in this house—call Mr. Monkton up, Malcolm." The lady sat in speechless horror at this sudden announcement; and when her brother entered the room, fell back senseless in her chair. Restoratives being promptly applied, she soon recovered; but "a change came over the spirit of her dream" on her brother saying her trick was found out, and that she must now expect to go to prison for it, as Dick had confessed all. Tears and entreaties were now substituted for boasts and threats, and appeals for mercy to Beauchamp, on account of her children, who would be thrown almost penniless on the world.

"Indeed, indeed, sir," she cried, "Mr. Douglas had very little to leave me when he died; and I have scarcely sufficient to support them and myself."

"The children of Mr. Douglas, although illegitimate," replied Beauchamp, "shall not want a friend; neither shall you be left destitute—on one condition—that you make a full confession of the part you have taken in this business."

"Do it, Susan," whispered her brother, "'tis your only chance; and trust to his lordship's generosity."

"I will make no terms with your sister, Mr. Monkton," added Beauchamp, "no promises of any kind; but will leave you with her alone for a few minutes, to decide how to act."

In a quarter of an hour Monkton came down to say his sister was ready to accompany them and make her declaration before a magistrate that she had no children born after her marriage with Mr. Douglas. They then returned to Forrester's and all the party concerned and implicated went before a magistrate, when their voluntary statements and depositions were written down by the clerk from their own mouths, duly signed and attested in his presence; and he expressed a hope that the originator of this nefarious plot might be brought to justice. "I must now beg, sir," replied Beauchamp, "for a warrant to apprehend this scoundrel, Mangle, and bring him before you to-morrow," which being granted, and placed in the officer's hands, the party then separated, Beauchamp having told Mrs. Douglas he should call upon her the next day.

From the statement of Mrs. Douglas, it appeared that Mangle first suggested the scheme of altering her marriage certificate and setting up some young man for her son; and that she then named her nephew as being exactly of the proper age. The alteration in the date of the year was made by the lawyer himself in her presence; and she was warned by that worthy to swear through thick and thin to her story, which she was fully prepared to do. Beauchamp, therefore, thought it prudent, in the absence of other evidence, to make use of this bad woman and her nephew to prove the case against the chief conspirator, Mangle, who held possession of the certificate; but the fraud being now clearly established by her own voluntary statement, and her nephew disproved, by his own father and mother, to be her son, he had no wish to proceed further, being most anxious to return to the country, although still considering it his duty to bring the greatest rogue of the party to condign punishment.

Having cautioned Monkton to take care of his son, and promising that young scamp that if he would remain at home and conduct himself steadily, he should be provided with some suitable employment, Beauchamp returned with Malcolm and Lord Henry to their club, where he wrote a note, with an order on his banker for ten thousand pounds, and handing it to Lord Henry, expressed his thanks for his ready wit in so quickly exposing the tricks of their opponents.

"Come, come, Beauchamp," exclaimed Malcolm, on seeing the amount, "only half this is your share—the other belongs to me."

"We can settle that another day, Malcolm, as I have no time now to write another draft—so come along, or I must leave you;" and, shaking hands with Lord Henry, he put on his hat and left the room.

CHAPTER XLVII.

The delight of Blanche on hearing from her lover that her rights were now completely re-established, may be easily imagined, when Malcolm said, "Ay, ay, Blanche, this is all right, and very capital news; but Beauchamp has not informed you that it has cost him ten thousand pounds;" and he then told her of their agreement with Lord Henry, and his having the whole instead of his proper share.

"I would willingly have given as much more," replied Beauchamp, "to relieve my dear Blanche of her apprehensions; and now the matter is settled, Malcolm, I beg you will never allude to it again, as it ought to have been private between us."

"So it would, Beauchamp, had you not served me the trick you did, by paying all; but I will be even with you, old fellow."

"My dear, generous William," exclaimed Blanche, "how can I ever repay you for all your kind, affectionate anxiety on my behalf?"

"Easily enough, my love," he replied; and, placing his arm round her waist, whispered, "by becoming my own dear Blanche on or before the first of August."

Her hand was placed in his, whilst a crimson hue suffused her face and forehead; but there was no reply.

"Well, Blanche," interposed Malcolm, "I guess what the reward is to be; but Beauchamp is not so very generous, after all; and I think he has made a capital bargain by paying ten thousand pounds for ten thousand a-year; this is quite *à la* Harcourt; and you may depend upon it, my love, Will Beauchamp is a long-headed, calculating fellow, and has got the blind side of you; stuff and nonsense about disinterested affection! He has been all the time looking to your money, my dear."

"Well, Charles, then I am most happy to find he has succeeded in getting it at last."

"And he will make ducks and drakes of it before you are married a couple of years."

"Ah, Charles, I don't regard your joking and bantering now," she replied, laughing; "neither will William; so good-bye, Charley dear, as I must run and tell Aunt Gordon this joyful news;" saying which, she tripped lightly from the drawing-room, like a second Hebe, radiant in smiles and beauty.

"By Jove!" cried Malcolm, "you are a lucky dog, Beauchamp, to have gained the love of that sweet, true-hearted girl, who is more like an angel than a woman."

"Indeed, Malcolm, I am most thankful for this inestimable blessing, and my life shall be devoted to her happiness."

"I don't doubt it, my dear fellow, for I believe you love her ten times more than your own self; and now let us dress for dinner."

The family party that evening was one of the happiest in London; and the gloom which had hung over Blanche Douglas being dispelled, her usual cheerfulness returned, which put the old earl and Mrs. Gordon in high spirits.

"Ah, you naughty child," exclaimed the former, "you are rejoicing now that you are on a par with my boy Will. I see it all, you proud girl."

"I am proud and pleased, my dear father, to have it in my power to bestow on him something which may compensate for the trouble he will have in taking care of me."

"No, no, child, you are thinking of the dash you will make in town next season as Lady Beauchamp, and drive my poor boy crazy with your flirtations; I read your purpose in those wicked eyes, Blanche, and am almost sorry you have recovered your fortune."

"It will be William's soon, my dear father, and if he chooses to bring me to London, I cannot prevent that; but I can prevent myself flirting."

"Then come here, child, I have a word to say for your ear alone;" and drawing Blanche close to him, he whispered, "if you ever do flirt, my dear girl, which Heaven forbid, you will certainly break your husband's heart, and your father's too."

"My kind, dear father," she replied, "never will I cause you or him one moment's uneasiness; and surely you do not think me capable of acting so disgracefully."

"No, no, my precious child; so now give me a kiss, and sing me my favourite old song of 'Home, sweet home,' where, please God, we will be again by the end of this week."

The next morning, the Bow Street officer called in Grosvenor Square about twelve o'clock, and informed Beauchamp that he believed Mangle had *cut and run.* "He never went to his office yesterday, my lord, and the woman at Monkton's lodging told me he was in a desperate way when the name of Lord Henry was mentioned, and jumping into a cab, he drove back to his own house. There also I could hear nothing more than that he had left early yesterday morning for his office. The door being thrown open, I thought it best not to search the house, or tell my errand, as I shall wait his return; but my impression is that he bolted the moment he heard young Monkton was nabbed, knowing he would squeak directly he was pinched."

Having handsomely rewarded the officer for his trouble, and given him his address in the country, Beauchamp sought Blanche to consult her about Mrs. Douglas. "I do not like the mother at all," he said; "she is a bold, impudent woman; but the two daughters are genteel-looking, handsome girls, with the Douglas features, and being your uncle's children, I suggest setting them up in some business together as milliners, or allowing their mother three hundred a-year to maintain them until they marry, when I will give each a good marriage portion, if they form respectable connections."

"Your proposal is very liberal, dear William, and you will of course take this money from my income."

"We will talk of that another day, my dear girl, as I have only consulted you now to know if you approve my plans; and as we have nothing to detain us in London, my father and myself intend leaving the day after to-morrow; and I need not say what pleasure it would give us both, if Aunt Gordon and yourself will travel with us; the two couples that are to be can occupy one carriage, and aunty and the governor the other, which will afford our venerable earl an opportunity of popping the question —only fancy aunty Countess of Annandale."

"Oh, William, how can you be so silly?"

"Silly, you stupid child! *you* are silly not to perceive the unmistakable signs of the governor's *penchant*, which I have particularly noticed for the last six months; the fire has been smouldering for some time, and you will soon see it burst forth into a flame; so now *we* have had our spell of love-making, we will give them an opportunity of playing the same game; but not a word or hint to aunty, Blanche; leave all the arrrangements to me: only go now and prepare her for leaving, whilst I drive down to Islington, and to-morrow I will take you with me to do a little shopping by ourselves."

Beauchamp gave Mrs. Douglas a severe lecture for her past infamous conduct, and then explained his intentions towards herself and children, for which she expressed her grateful thanks.

"It will now," he said, "depend on your future conduct whether you receive any further assistance from Miss Douglas and myself;" and desiring then to see her daughters, he told them also the allowance he had made their mother for their joint benefit, and his promise of a marriage portion to each; "but bear in mind, young ladies," he continued, "I do not wish you to 'marry in haste and repent at leisure,' merely for the sake of the money, which I intend shall be yours, whether you marry or not, at the expiration of two years from this time; and if I hear a good account of you, that sum may be increased." Then, placing twenty pounds in the hand of each, with a handsome present to the mother, Beauchamp withdrew.

He was followed down-stairs by the younger girl, Margaret, who, on opening the street door, said, "Will you tell me where you live, Lord Beauchamp?"

"Why do you wish to know?" was the inquiry.

"That I may write you those thanks which I cannot now express: indeed, my lord, I feel most grateful for your great kindness, which has saved us from misery and disgrace."

"Your name is——"

"Margaret," she replied.

"There, then, Margaret, is my card and address; write me your thoughts, not your thanks—the latter I can dispense with."

"Oh, thank you, my lord," she replied, raising her eyes, glistening with tears, to his. There was so much in that appealing look which reminded Beauchamp so forcibly of his own dear Blanche, that he said, in his soothing tones, "Are you not happy here, my poor girl?"

She burst instantly into tears, but made no reply.

"Come, Margaret, suppress your sobs; I will call for you to-morrow at eleven o'clock, so be ready for me, and I will take you a drive where you can tell me your wishes—but stay, I will let your mother know my intentions;" and running up-stairs, he asked her permission to take Margaret with him the next day to see a lady, who, he thought, might be of service to her. This was readily granted, and Beauchamp, finding Margaret still below, bid her cheer up, and shaking hands with her, jumped into his cab, and drove back to Grosvenor Square, where, the moment his knock was heard at the door, Blanche ran down to meet him in the hall. Taking her into the morning-room, he said, "Ah, Blanche, I have been making a fool of myself, I believe; but you know my soft heart is always dragging me into scrapes, and a woman's tears knock me over at once." He then related what had passed between him and Margaret.

"Dear William," she replied, "how can I blame you? Perhaps this poor girl is very miserable with such a mother, and I will consult with Aunt Gordon what we can do with her; so pray bring her here at any rate, and we can see her in this room, without Aunt Malcolm knowing anything about her."

Whatever Beauchamp said or did being almost certain to obtain Mrs. Gordon's approval, she expressed great sympathy in the cause of this unhappy girl, and agreed to take her as companion, if she realised Beauchamp's expectations, and really wished to leave her home.

"There, aunty dear," said Beauchamp, "you are more soft-hearted than myself; but she has such a look of Blanche, that I am sure you will take a fancy to her directly."

"Well, my dear boy, when you take Blanche from me, which I suppose will be the case very soon, I shall be left quite alone, and this poor girl may be some comfort to me, as well as a help in my old age."

"My dearest, kindest friend," replied Beauchamp, pressing her hand in his, "you will never be left long alone by your dear children, as you call us; for you must either be with us, or we with you; so don't, my dear aunt, think of taking this girl on that account."

"Well, well, William, then I can have her for a month or two occasionally; so let me see her to-morrow morning."

It is almost needless to add that, from Mrs. Gordon being already prepossessed in her favour, Margaret was received very kindly by that lady and Blanche; and after a long conversation about family matters, in which, with good taste and feeling, she spoke as little as necessary of her mother's character and conduct, sufficient transpired to induce Mrs. Gordon to take her as companion; and she accordingly gave her directions how to reach the Priory, with money to pay her expenses by coach, the beginning of the following week. Nothing could exceed the delight of the poor girl at this arrangement, who, it appeared, was very unhappy with her mother and sister, from causes which it is unnecessary to mention. Beauchamp, after her interview with Mrs. Gordon, escorted Margaret to a cab; and having received her grateful thanks for his extreme kindness, gave directions to the driver where to go, and returned, according to his promise, to take Blanche for a walk. The first shop they entered was Turner's, the jeweller, where Beauchamp had ordered a pair of bracelets, set with precious stones, of great value, with a beautiful necklace to correspond.

"There, Blanche," he whispered, "is a little wedding present, which you must accept at my hands, unless you prefer something else."

"Indeed, William," she replied, "I have quite sufficient jewellery already; and do not like putting you to greater expense on my account, after the immense sum you have paid Lord Henry."

"I have ordered these purposely for you, dear girl, and you will seriously offend me by refusing them;—they are fetters for your hands, and a chain for your neck, by which I shall bind you in cruel bondage to me for ever. Now, Blanche, there is one other purchase I must make, of unspeakable value to me, though of little value in itself—a plain ring for your finger, which I shall keep until a certain auspicious morning."

And Beauchamp, desiring a tray of rings to be brought and laid on the counter, told the foreman to leave them for their inspection, whilst he attended to his other customers.

"Now, my dear girl, take off your left-hand glove, and try one of these on your third finger."

Blanche blushed deeply, and her hand trembled, so that Beauchamp tried the rings for her; and selecting the one which fitted her best, said softly—"Why do you tremble thus, my own dearest love? Do you repent your choice?"

"Oh, no, no, William; never can I do that; but I am rather nervous this morning."

"Then look at those jewels further down, my love, whilst I have these things put up," which being done, he returned to her. "Now, Blanche, which of those trinkets would suit dear aunty best? for I must and will make her a present worth her acceptance."

"I fear she will think us both very extravagant children, William, and lecture us, instead of receiving a present; but I was just thinking of buying those bracelets (pointing them out) for her."

"Then I shall take that trouble off your hands, Blanche, and you shall give her this brooch instead; but you need not now pay for it, as Mr. Turner has my name on his books, and I have desired him to send in my account, with these articles included."

Blanche remonstrated, but in vain; when Beauchamp, taking up the two cases containing the brooch and the ring, desired the other things might be sent to Grosvenor Square by six o'clock at the latest that evening.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

The next morning, after an early breakfast, as Beauchamp and Blanche, equipped in travelling costume, were looking out of the window of Lady Malcolm's house, a handsome barouche, with postilions gaily dressed in jackets of the Beauchamp livery, and four beautiful bay horses, drove up to the door.

"Why, William," exclaimed Blanche, in surprise, "whose is that gay equipage?"

"Yours, my dear girl; the carriage and horses I have bought expressly for your use."

She raised her eyes filled with tears, to his, with a look of grateful affection, without speaking—deep emotion preventing her utterance, when they were interrupted by Malcolm's entering the room. "Is that your smart turn-out, Beauchamp?"

"No, Malcolm," was the quiet reply, with a smile.

"The lads have your uniform, my boy, at any rate; but," looking at Blanche, "oh, I see—they are my Lady Beauchamp's. By Jove! old fellow, you have got the start of me, as usual, doing things in your silent, mysterious way. I have ordered a carriage for Constance, also; but it won't be finished this fortnight. Where did you get yours?"

"At Houlditch's; it was built for a gentleman, who was obliged unexpectedly to leave England, and I took it off his hands."

"And the bays?"

"Picked them up here and there about town."

"Egad! they are fine, slashing, well-bred looking animals —fit for hunting."

"Yes, Malcolm, I looked them over, and have had them tried several times together in harness, and am satisfied they are quiet and good-tempered; and you will see presently they can go a pretty good pace, when we are clear of London."

"Really, Blanche, Beauchamp is resolved, I see, that you shall do things in style, and if you have not been a spoilt child, there is every prospect of your being a spoilt wife, my love. But here comes the other carriage, for the old pair; so now let us be off, as I have taken leave of my mother, who has not yet left her room, but has promised to join us at the Priory, within the month."

Constance now appeared, saying her father and Aunt Gordon were ready, and waiting below.

"Well, Malcolm," said the old peer, "what do you think of Will taking us all by surprise with that smart equipage for Blanche, and not to tell even his old father what he was about?"

"Just like him, my dear governor—always doing things on the sly."

"And always thinking of those he loves, before himself," added Mrs. Gordon.

"Now then, Will, off with your party," cried his father, "whilst Mrs. Gordon and myself bring up the rear."

In ten minutes the four bays were trotting majestically through Hyde Park, making light of the barouche which followed at their heels, and the four happy occupants of its inside seats, whose cheerful voices and beaming smiles betokened their joy of being once more "homeward bound." No two schoolboys could be in higher spirits than Malcolm and Beauchamp; nor were Constance and Blanche less happy at their emancipation from the thraldom of town life.

"Now then," cried Malcolm, when they had left the streets behind them, "let us see what Blanche's bays can do; put them along, Beauchamp."

"Pray don't let them go too fast, William," she cried, as he rose to speak to the postilions; "pray don't, to oblige me."

"Well, my love, then they shall only canter up the next rising ground, to show Malcolm how they can go together," which direction was given; but when once put on their mettle, the horses increased their speed to a full gallop, and raced away for a couple of miles, in spite of every effort to stop them. "Hurrah!" exclaimed Malcolm; "now we go Leger pace, by jingo! Blanche, they can gallop a few."

"Oh, William," cried both the girls at once, now seriously alarmed, "pray stop them, or we shall be dashed to pieces."

"Sooner said than done, my dears," said Malcolm; "but sit still, or you will be thrown out, you two silly girls."

Beauchamp, occupying the front seat with Blanche, and seeing the boys straining in vain to pull up their horses, shouted out, "Steady, my lads; let them go, but hold their heads near together, and sit firm in your seats."

To Beauchamp's horror, they were now rapidly approaching a broad-wheeled waggon occupying the centre of the road, with its jingling bells, and no appearance of a driver, who was, he concluded, as usual, half asleep inside. Destruction to them all seemed almost inevitable, and he turned deadly pale, when a sudden thought struck him. He had a new hunting-horn in the pocket of the carriage, which had been sent home from Percival's that morning, just before he left Grosvenor Square, which instantly seizing, he sent forth a blast so shrill and loud, that it penetrated the waggoner's dull ear amidst his din of bells, and the heavy vehicle was seen turning slowly aside. Still there seemed scarcely a chance of its giving room to pass before the leaders would be even with its hind wheels, and Beauchamp, fearing the crisis was at hand, and telling Malcolm to do the same to Constance, seized Blanche firmly with his right arm round the waist, taking tight hold of the handle of the carriage door with his left. The act was instantaneous, and as they passed the heavy, lumbering machine, the exclamation escaped him, "Thank God! we are saved." Blanche neither moved nor spoke, overcome by Beauchamp's manner, and the dread of some imminent peril.

"Now, my love," he whispered, "we have escaped the danger, sit firm a few minutes longer, and I will soon stop your fiery bays." They were already beginning to slacken their pace a little, which was evident to Beauchamp's quick eye, their heads being raised, and their ears becoming erect, when raising his voice he shouted out, "Hold hard!" In a moment their speed diminished. "Hold hard!" again cried Beauchamp, "you runaway brutes! hold hard!" These words seemed magical. The race was over; and all four horses stood still.

"Let them stand till I get out, my lads," Beauchamp cried. He then folded Blanche in his arms, who burst into tears.

"Come, come, my dear girl, it is all over now, and we will have no more galloping to-day."

Malcolm, warned by Beauchamp, and following his example, had held Constance tight round the waist as they were passing the waggon, and his face became ghastly pale, with a shuddering sensation, as the wheels just grazed each other; but when the danger was over, his levity quickly returned.

"By Jeremy Diddler! that was an uncommon near shave—just half an inch, and—oh! my, as Mrs. Winter has it—what an *hexpose* we should have made—all legs and wings sprawling in the road, like two couples of untrussed chickens."

"For shame, Charles!" exclaimed Constance, "to make a joke of such a serious matter, when our lives might have been lost through your frolic."

"Well then, my dear, you and Blanche can do a little *à la* Niobe, whilst I and Beauchamp look over the nags."

"Why, Tom, you young villain!" cried Malcolm, addressing the first lad, who was no other than Lord Henry's late tiger, "how dare you spring them along at that furious rate, frightening the ladies almost into fits?"

"Couldn't help it, my lord, they would go; and if master hadn't thought of 'hold hard!' they wouldn't 'a stopped till we got to Hounslow."

Beauchamp, the while, was patting the horses' necks, and speaking to them in his *horse* language, which soothed their excited tempers; and having carefully looked over the harness and carriage, to see there was nothing out of place, he gave orders to the postilions not to break again out of a trot, and resumed his seat by the side of Blanche, who looked very grave, if not offended.

"Are you angry with me," he asked, "because the horses ran away?"

"I have been very much frightened, William, by the awful position in which we were placed, and you have shown very little consideration for my feelings, when I entreated you not to allow the horses to go so fast."

"I merely thought of giving them a canter against the hill, dear girl, and am fully sensible now of my excessive folly in rousing the spirits of four thorough-bred horses; but my agony of mind on passing that waggon, words cannot describe. Had an accident occurred, I never could have forgiven myself that boyish freak. Even now, the thought of it makes me shudder, and it will be a lesson to me as long as I live. I do not ask your forgiveness, Blanche, for I do not deserve it;" and he turned round, leaning over the front, to order the lads to go slower. Blanche turned also towards the horses, and placing her hand on his arm, said affectionately, "I am not angry with you, dear William, only I felt hurt at your disregarding my wishes; but give me your hand, and let us say no more on the subject."

"Ay, ay," cried Malcolm, "that's the plan, Blanche; begin with him early, my love, and let him know at once that the grey mare is more than a match for the four bays. Egad! Beauchamp, I never saw a fellow knock under so quickly as you do; if Con was to lecture me for a spree of that sort, I would set them going again like mad; and now, I suppose, seven miles an hour is to be our pace for the remainder of the day."

"Not so, Malcolm, when we have posters, of whose running away there is little danger. Rather, however, than frighten Blanche again, I would be two days on the journey, instead of one; but if our pace does not suit you, you and Constance can join the governor, and let us have Aunt Gordon."

"And not a bad move either, with two such slow coaches as yourself and Blanche," replied Malcolm. "Egad, old fellow! that girl will soon make a regular Molly Coddle of you; and as for hunting, riding over five-barred gates and double ditches, after you are married, don't again think of such dangerous exploits; but if my timid little cousin had accepted Danby or Ayrshire, she would have been bowled along thirty miles an hour, *malgré* her tears and entreaties, which they would only have laughed at."

"I never would have accepted either, Charles, which you know very well," replied Blanche, indignantly.

"Lucky for you you did not, my love, as no one would have suited you but this soft-hearted fellow, Beauchamp, who is ever giving in to your whims and fancies."

"And ever will, Malcolm, when they are not unreasonable," added Beauchamp; "so a truce to further badinage. Blanche shall do as she likes with her own."

"And that means you, as well as her horses, old fellow."

"Exactly so, Malcolm," was the good-humoured reply, which restored the party to their usual cheerfulness; and after changing horses at Hounslow, they again set forth on their journey, and halted not on the road until they reached Newbury, where Beauchamp, seeing some beautiful trout, ordered them for an early dinner, and waited for his father and Mrs. Gordon, a stroll being proposed in the meantime.

On returning to the inn, after a short walk, they found the venerable earl with his companion, both of whom inflicted a sharp lecture on Beauchamp and Malcolm for leaving them so far behind.

"No help for it, governor," said Malcolm; "those fiery bays of Lady Beauchamp's ran away with us, and very nearly capsized the whole lot into a broad-wheeled waggon—just the nearest thing imaginable, half an inch more, and—oh my, what a scrimmage!"

"I will engage, Charles, you had something to do with it," replied Mrs. Gordon.

"Just the smallest, littlest finger in the pie only, this time, aunty dear—merely asked Beauchamp to put them out a wee bittie to try their paces, and off we went at Derby speed.

'Away, away, our steeds and we,
Upon the pinions of the wind,
All human dwellings left behind;
We sped like meteors through the sky,'
Until Will Beauchamp raised a cry,
And checked our coursers, fast and furious,
Which made Miss Douglas look quite curious."

"Charles, you are quite incorrigible," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon; "always engaged in some mischief or freak, like a schoolboy."

"Only in a little recreation to-day, dear aunt; it was very hot, and the ladies wanted fanning, for which I have been already punished by being sent to Coventry by my Lady Beauchamp, who has scarcely spoken to me since this untoward event occurred. But now," ringing the bell, "for these Kennet trout, with which, I suppose, we must order some Kennet ale to wash them down. Dinner, waiter, instanter," as that person appeared.

"Yes, sir—my lord—I beg pardon."

"Drop my lord, and bring the trout."

"Soup, my lord?"

"No, sir; fill the tureen with Kennet ale."

"What wines, my lord?"

"Champagne, hock, hermitage, sauterne, moselle—half-a-dozen of each—quick—presto—begone!"

"Beg pardon, my lord," said the waiter, "but I'm afraid we hav'n't all them wines in the cellar."

"Avaunt! fiend—begone!" cried Malcolm with a theatrical air. "What! will you make a younker of me?—shall I not take mine ease in mine inn, but I shall have my pocket picked?—Shakespeare—ahem!"

The waiter, with a stare of astonishment, instantly disappeared from the room, telling the landlady that one of the gentlemen was either mad or a London play actor.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Malcolm's valet, "that's my lord and master, I'll swear; always cracking his jokes with everybody he meets."

The trout were quickly placed on the table, with a couple of bottles of champagne and ditto of hock, which being discussed by the hungry party, a cold fore-quarter of lamb succeeded, with a dish of veal cutlets and broiled ham, then pastry of various kinds, to conclude with an old Wiltshire cheese, salad, and Kennet ale, to which the gentlemen did ample justice.

"Well, aunty," asked Malcolm, "don't you feel all the better for this bit of a refresher? that Kennet ale slips down beautifully, and I feel like the little boy after eating more than *quantum suff.* of plum pudding, as if my jacket was buttoned."

"When will you cease to be a boy, Charles?"

"Never, aunty dear, until I am buckled up, when, according to the old song,

'Needles and pins—needles and pins;
When a man marries, his trouble begins.'

But, my gracious" (as the waiter brought in a basket of live cray fish, ordered by Beauchamp), "here's another little present for Lady Beauchamp. Come, my love," to Blanche, "just look at these pretty little creatures, so lively and sportive; just touch them, my dear, so nice and cool;" and putting her hand in the basket, she was seized by the finger, which caused more than an exclamation of surprise—on which Malcolm rushed from the room, and did not appear again until the carriages stood at the door.

"Has it hurt you much, dear girl?" asked Beauchamp, jumping up from his chair, and running to her rescue.

"Oh no, William, it only pinched my finger rather hard."

"Really it is too bad of Malcolm, with such practical jokes" (seeing her finger bleeding), "which I will not put up with."

"Pray don't be angry with him, William," she pleaded; "it was my own fault, for being so silly as to put my hand in the basket."

"Now, ladies and gemmen," said Malcolm, peeping in at the door and touching his hat, "time's up, and the coach is awaiting."

"Ah, you young scamp!" shouted the old earl, "I'll doublethong you, when I catch you at Bampton, for serving Blanche that trick."

"She wouldn't open her mouth to me, daddy dear, so I wished to know if she had lost her voice; but she spoke quick enough to the cray fish when *he* asked her a question. Did he bite very sharp, my love?" he inquired, in a pitying tone, of Blanche.

"So sharp, Charles, that he made my finger bleed."

"Did he indeed, dear girl? I beg a thousand pardons for my foolery, as I thought they could only squeeze a little."

Malcolm having feelingly expressed contrition for his offence, which was readily forgiven, their seats were resumed in the carriage as before, until the last stage on the road, where Malcolm and Blanche joined Mrs. Gordon for the Priory, and the old earl drove off, with his son and daughter, to Bampton.

CHAPTER XLIX.

The following morning, very early, Blanche was in the full enjoyment of the flower-garden; buoyant in spirits, light at heart, and as perfectly happy as it is possible for any human being to be. Soon after breakfast, Beauchamp rode over to see his beloved, with whom he spent the day. How different were his feelings now to the last time he had wandered through the grounds of the Priory, accompanied by Blanche Douglas—then with the feverish, restless anxiety about her first entrance on a new sphere of life, and the dreaded influence of the world on her guileless, unsuspecting mind. The ordeal had now been passed, temptation resisted, and her constancy to him proved beyond doubt or cavil. Beauchamp had cause to be proud of all this. He was not proud, however, but thankful—deeply thankful to that Almighty Power by whose grace and protection she had been preserved from falling into those errors and follies by which so many young girls are influenced.

They were sitting now in the old arbour during the heat of the day, Blanche reclining on a rustic chair, whilst these thoughts were passing through Beauchamp's mind. He was silent for a few moments, which she noticed. "Of what are you thinking, dear William?" Still there was no reply.

"Will you not tell me," she inquired, "what has caused this sudden thoughtfulness? Surely, I may now share in all your cares, as well as pleasures. Tell me, then, my own dear William, what has made you look so serious."

"I was thinking, my dearest girl, of that deep debt of gratitude I owe to God for the ineffable and undeserved happiness I now enjoy in having you restored to me again, unaffected and uncontaminated by the world, as when we last sat together here; and a thought crossed my mind, to pour out my thanks to our merciful Father for this blessing, on this very spot, where we last parted in sorrow and sadness, and now meet in joy."

"Your thoughts are mine also, dear William," she replied, rising and placing her hand in his; "let me kneel by your side."

Happy they who, like Blanche and Beauchamp, "remember now THEIR Creator in the days of *their* youth"—who acknowledge with thankfulness (despising the sneers and sarcasms of the worldly-minded) that source from which all true blessings flow; and as they set out to thread this devious earthly path below, keep steadfastly in view the home to which it leads. Who does not join in that prayer of Balaam: "Oh, may I die the death of the righteous, and may my latter end be like his?" But how few bear in mind that to die the death, they must also live the life of the righteous. Tell men of an Australian land where gold, silver, diamonds, and precious stones abound, even with hard toil and trouble to be acquired; see the eagerness with which they listen, the increasing anxiety displayed in searching out every particular concerning this earthly paradise. Tell them of another far *better*, more glorious land, to which all the countries of the earth are in comparison like a stagnant pool of water to the ocean; tell them of a city whose walls are built of jasper, and her streets paved with gold; whose buildings glitter with rubies, amethysts, and pearls; tell them of a second Eden, where man shall regain his lost innocence and dignity; tell them of a newly-created world, in which all animal and vegetable nature shall far surpass in magnitude and magnificence what we behold here below; where God himself shall reign as king, with angels for his ministers; whence death, and pain, and sorrow are for ever banished, and the lion shall lie down with the lamb—tell them this land, with all its happiness and joys unspeakable, may be, nay, must be theirs, if they seek, as they would the hidden treasures of this, with diligence and care;—and what will they say in return? "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee." Oh, fools! with all your worldly wisdom, blind, besotted fools! who barter a few quickly passing years, with all their short-lived, unsatisfactory pleasures and enjoyments, for eternity!

As Blanche and Beauchamp were kneeling side by side, pouring out their thanks to their Maker, and imploring his protection and blessing through their wedded life, Mrs. Gordon, unperceived, passed noiselessly by, and the devout aspiration of Jabez escaped her lips: "Oh, that Thou wouldest bless *them* indeed!"

* * * * * *

A month has passed—it is the 1st of August, a bright and lovely morning. Again are Lord Beauchamp and Blanche kneeling side by side, the latter never more to rise as Blanche Douglas. She is kneeling at the altar, with her hand in his, whose cherished name she now bears, as the wife of William Beauchamp. The village church of Bampton is thronged with spectators, rich and poor, to witness the double marriage of Beauchamp and his sister. Lord Malcolm looked serious enough during the ceremony; but his love for teasing Blanche would break forth directly after, when he whispered, "The *Gordon* knot, my love, is tied at last, which dear aunty has been so long in weaving."

"And most thankful am I, Charles, to Heaven," she replied, "and to that dear aunt for such a blessing."

There was not a vacant pew that morning in Bampton Church. For miles around, the farmers, with their wives and daughters, flocked to the scene, to witness the marriage of their favourite (whom they still persisted in calling "the young squire") and his sister; and when the two couples issued from the sacred portals, amid a peal of bells pulled by right vigorous arms, a line was formed by the congregation from the porch to the churchyard gate; and one long, loud cheer burst forth, as they passed along, from all assembled.

A grand breakfast was prepared at Bampton, to which all the neighbouring gentry had been invited, to conclude with a farmers' ball in the evening; at which some of the higher orders wished to be present also. Neither were the poor forgotten—tents being erected on the lawn for the whole population of Bampton parish, with the substantial fare of roast beef and plum pudding, supplied by the two principal innkeepers of the village, to which they sat down at two o'clock. Rustic games and pastimes succeeded, with dancing on the green sward in the evening.

The newly-married couples, having changed their bridal attire for travelling costume, drove off immediately afterwards *en route* to the North; Lord Beauchamp and Blanche for Annandale Castle, and Malcolm and Constance for his seat in Scotland. The bitterness of parting with his only daughter was considerably mollified to the old earl by the promise of their returning at the end of a month or six weeks to spend the winter at Bampton; and Mrs. Gordon felt too happy in the attainment of all her wishes, to think so deeply as she otherwise would of the temporary separation from her affectionate niece and newly-made nephew, both of whom she loved as her own children. Her sister, Lady Malcolm, also, was now staying at the Priory, with Mrs. Fortescue, who accompanied her from town, where she intended to remain until the first week in September, by which time Beauchamp and Blanche were expected home again.

Bob Conyers, with his usual disinterestedness, to prevent his old friend feeling solitary after his children's departure, had invited himself to spend a week at Bampton; and for the present there was no lack of guests, Lord Henry Bayntun, Sir William Burnet, Gywnne, and Melville having come expressly for the occasion. Fred Beauchamp was there also, who, in his son's absence, was of great service, as well as comfort, to the old earl. Lady Malcolm and Mrs. Gordon, with the gay widow, having been invited to spend the day at Bampton, took a lively interest in all the proceedings in honour of their niece's marriage; and, accompanied by the earl, Bob Conyers, and Fred Beauchamp, visited all the tents in succession at the dinner hour, to see the arrangements made to regale so large a company, and were not less amused than gratified by the cordial meeting between the founder of the feast and some of his aged parishioners.

"Ah, squire," said an old man, nearly bent double by years and infirmities, "I never thought as how I should live to see the loike of this, but there—what's the dame want?"—(as an elderly female whispered in his ear)—"she do say, squire, as I be to call you my lord—but it don't seem natural loike. I've ha' know'd ye as Squire Beauchamp handy sixty years, and I be used to the name—so doant ye take it amiss, as I do love the old squire, and the young un too. God bless un, and prosper un, with that angel, Miss Blanche."

"Hark ye, Job," replied the earl, "if you ever dare to 'my lord me,' I shall think you an arrant old hypocrite; so sit down and go to work with your knife and fork."

Mrs. Gordon, who was known to all the neighbouring poor for her benevolent and charitable disposition, was deservedly beloved by them, entering into their joys and sorrows with the most unaffected and truly Christian feeling, and she had ever a kind word to say, as well as a kind look to bestow, on the poor and humble, in addition to more substantial proofs of sympathy. In their drives about the country, Mrs. Gordon's and Blanche's visits were not restricted to their rich acquaintances; and in their rambles near home, their footsteps were constantly directed to the lowly cottages of the poor, to console them in their afflictions, and minister to their wants. On this occasion, Mark Rosier was appointed master of the ceremonies, to superintend the whole proceedings and preserve order; and the office could not have devolved on one more zealously affected towards the house of Beauchamp. In fact, since the rescue of Blanche from Lord Vancourt's devices, Mark had become rapidly a man of consequence, and was now under-steward on the Bampton estates, with a salary commensurate with his fidelity and honesty. His father was also once more in a flourishing condition as a farmer.

"Really, Mark," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, "I hardly knew you again; you look more like a gentleman than a——"

"Poacher, you would have said, my lady," added Mark, good-humouredly; "but if I have got good clothes on my back now, my dearly-respected lady, Mark Rosier is not the man to forget who put them there."

"Indeed, Mark, I meant no unkind reflection on yourself, and rejoice most truly in your good fortune."

"Ah, my lady! times are altered to me indeed; but far beyond all the money, I value the confidence placed in me by my dear young master, who seems to think he can never repay me for a little bit of service I once did, which was nothing particular, after all."

"To us all, Mark, it was a very particular piece of service, for had you not detected that detestable plot, none of us had now been present at these rejoicings, and sorrow instead of happiness had filled our hearts. You are well chosen, my faithful friend, to preside on this auspicious occasion, and as long as life is spared us, we shall never forget our gratitude for your gallant conduct."

"And mind, Mark," interposed Fred, "these good people don't get tipsy to-night."

"Then, Master Fred, you must come and help me keep the tap, as I suspect, whether I will or no—(with a sly wink at Fred)—it'll be a very wet arternoon."

"Indeed, I hope not," said Mrs. Gordon; "I should be sorry these poor people were deprived of their day's amusement."

"There aint any fear of its being wet overhead, my lady; but then, you know, it is very hot weather, and there be a number of thirsty souls here to-day. Then there'll be Lord and Lady Beauchamp's health to drink—Lord and Lady Malcolm's—my lord's, in course—and your ladyship's, and a few others, with bumpers all round, and I rayther think some of these good folk will feel werry moist indeed before nightfall."

Leaving our happy rustics to the full enjoyment of their festival, which did not terminate until darkness stole over the scene, which, as might be expected, had long previously stolen over the senses of many of the guests, so as to render them oblivious of time and their road home, we will now transfer our reader to the ball-room at Bampton House, which was crowded to overflowing with the bold yeomen, their wives and daughters, and a fair sprinkling of gentility. Of the latter were Sir Lionel Markham and family, the Comptons, Rollestons, all the bachelors of the hunt, with Mr. and Mrs. Winterbottom, who had particularly begged to be present. The earl opened the ball in a country dance with Mrs. Styles, a fine buxom-looking woman of fifty. The other gentlemen selected partners also among the farmers' wives and daughters, this being the rule to be observed in the first dance.

Selina Markham seized upon young Hazel for her partner; and Fred Beauchamp introduced Mrs. Fortescue to the brother of Miss Fairacre, the prettiest girl in the room, whom he had engaged for himself. Bob Conyers, undertaking the part of master of the ceremonies, soon provided for all the dancing youngsters by mutual introductions. Captain Markham, who was playing fierce attention to Miss Honoria, voted it "a demmed bore" to be pulled nearly off his legs by a strong young damsel, through every couple, down to the bottom of the room. "I say, Fred," he whispered, when left at ease for a few seconds, "I sha'n't have any more of this fun—don't pay, old fellow—just see my Phillis, a full blown peony's a fool to her—demmit! makes one hot to look at her—heavy in hand as a four-year old. Cut and run, by Jove, Fred."

"Can't be done, Markham—orders from head quarters for one dance with the rustics; then please ourselves afterwards. So here we go at it again—cross hands, down the middle and up again," with which the captain was whirled away by his Amazonian partner. On crossing hands with his sister, she asked, "Cool and comfortable, Ned, eh?"

"Demmed uncomfortable, Selina; but you don't catch me doing drill work of this sort again." Immediately after, his partner making a false step, could not recover her equilibrium, and holding the captain tight in hand, dragged him down with her, giving him a rattling fall, Fred and his partner rolling over him.

"My gracious!" exclaimed Selina, "the life-guardsman floored at last! quick, Hazel, pick him up, or he'll be smothered by that Amazon, who is as heavy as a sack of grains. Oh, me!

what will Miss Honoria say to her darling captain being smashed in that fashion?"

Both Hazel and Fred Beauchamp laughed so immoderately as to be incapable of rendering any assistance, for the captain's leg being crooked under him, his ankle was severely sprained, so that he could with difficulty raise himself; but Conyers hastened to assist him, inquiring where he was injured.

"Eh! aw! Bob, queer about the ankle—pains fearfully; give me your arm, old fellow; hobble away to a chair—deuced awkward affair, floored by a woman! 'pon honour."

As the captain limped across the room in search of a seat, Mrs. Winterbottom, pitying his distressed looks, with anguish pictured on his brow, rose from her most comfortable chair, and insisted on his taking possession of it.

"Oh, captain dear, this comes o' romping in them nasty country dances; and there's my Honoria been nearly torn to bits by that young farmer-chap, whisking and whirling her about till she's not fit to be seen, with her hair all about her face, and her dress rumpled and crumpled as if it had been taken out of a clothes bag; but here she comes—my gracious! such a figure, and so 'ot, poor thing." And sure enough, Miss Honoria's dress and tresses were rather the worse for the rushing and crushing she had been obliged to undergo when hauled about by young Mr. Hardcastle, who was not one of the most graceful in his movements, or very particular about an extra hop or two, whether in or out of time.

With the proverbial unselfishness of women, however, Miss Honoria's first inquiring looks were directed to Markham, whose fall she had witnessed. "I fear," she said, "you have been very much injured by that awkward girl's falling?"

"Much better now, thank you," he replied, "pray take my seat," attempting to rise, when another sharp twinge made the captain twist again.

"Sit still, Captain Markham, I beg and entreat."

"'Pon honour, couldn't perpetrate such rudeness, as to sit still whilst you are standing, Miss Honoria."

"Then," she said, "I shall leave you directly, if you make another effort to rise."

At this moment the Earl (his dance being finished) came up to inquire about his accident. "Well, Markham, I see how it is, and rest is your only remedy—an easy chair here, or in the drawing-room—which do you prefer?"

"Oh, here, by all means," was the reply, "as I should like to see the fun out."

In a few minutes a low chair was brought in for the captain's especial use, with a footstool to rest his leg upon, and being engaged to Miss Honoria for the first quadrille, that young lady, in compassion to his misfortunes, insisted on sitting with him during the dance. Now, on what exact terms it was effected, we are not at liberty to disclose; but certain it is that this little attention of the young lady, coupled with some melting looks from a pair of very beautiful black eyes, so softened the captain's heart, that a declaration of love followed, and crimson cheeks, with down-cast looks, were the only answers returned, which the captain took as intended.

The pressure of her hand, with a few *sotto voce* whisperings of love and devotion succeeded, with a conclusion more *in alto*—"Eh! 'pon honour, how romantic, and all that sort of thing."

Selina, who had been casting searching glances towards the happy pair, felt assured, by the young lady's behaviour, that the die was cast. "Here, Bob," she exclaimed to her partner, "that fool, Ned, has fallen into the mash-tub at last, and I'll bet a pony, as Lord Henry says, that Miss Honoria has booked him. My gracious! what a row there will be, when mamma finds we are to have Mrs. Winter for a mother-in-law."

"Any way, my dear, hers is a better name than Hogsflesh, and I know Ned had serious ideas about a young lady of that name in London, this season, the daughter of a retired soap-boiler. Honoria herself is very well—a pretty, unassuming, well-educated girl; and, I can tell you, a brewery is a very lucrative, safe investment, with large returns, and the business itself quite respectable; so, on the whole, Ned has decided wisely, and we must put up with the old lady's vulgarities, if indeed she is disposed to trouble us with them, which I very much question."

"Ah! Bob, you are ever making the best of things."

"And so, my dear, I hope you also, for the future, will look always on the sunny side, which is the wisest thing to do."

CHAPTER L.

We must now turn our attention to Mrs. Fortescue and Fred Beauchamp, who were lounging (the latter at least) through a quadrille.

"What do you think," he was asking her, "of our country practices at a wedding? our rustic games and dances?"

"To me," she replied, "everything I have witnessed to-day has been most delightful. The dear old earl's unaffected, almost parental kindness to his poor neighbours, and their joyous looks, beaming with gratitude, in return, awaken kindred feelings in my own heart, and recall the associations of my earlier years, when I was a country girl. Happy are they, indeed (if they could estimate truly that happiness), who live a country life, far removed from the bustle and turmoil of the city; and I can truly say—

'From the court to the cottage convey me away,
For I'm weary of grandeur and what they call gay,
Where pride without measure,
And pomp without pleasure,
Make life in a circle of hurry decay.'

I'm tired to death of London dust and smoke—I have never seen a more united family than yours appears to be; and really have serious thoughts of taking some place in the neighbourhood, to be near your excellent uncle, with whom I confess to have fallen desperately in love."

"Well, then," said Fred, lowering his voice, "as you cannot be the earl's wife, will it content you to be his niece?"

For a moment she gazed steadfastly on her partner's face; and in the serious look which met her inquiring eyes, she read his meaning, but made no response.

"Have I offended you," he asked, in a quiet, subdued tone, "by my abrupt question?"

"No," she replied, as the colour rose to her very brow; "I will not pretend to misunderstand you, but——"

"Stay one moment, ere you pronounce my doom," he said, earnestly. "Remember your promise at Almack's, which I have pondered on ever since—how fondly and fatally, none will ever know; for I see my fate hangs on a thread, which one more word will sever. Oh, speak it not," he added; "and forgive my presumption in having ventured thus far."

"Frederick," she said, gently, "I will spare your feelings as much as I can, in justice to my own; but you must not misunderstand either my sentiments or my words. I like you as a friend and companion; but our acquaintance has been of very recent date, and I must see and know more of you before I could entrust my happiness to your keeping."

"Then you will not at once discard me, as I dreaded," he murmured, passionately. "A thousand thanks for that concession. I ask no more. I am now content."

"Thus let it be, then," she added. "But mind you are not too sanguine in your hopes—I see the Earl approaching."

"Well, Mrs. Fortescue," he inquired, "what do you think of our country lasses?"

"Indeed," she replied, "many of them are exceedingly pretty, genteel-looking girls; and so nicely dressed, with their hair arranged quite *à la mode*, that I should have thought some London milliner and hair-dresser had been engaged preparing them for the occasion."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "you are not far from the truth, as Blanche and Constance's maids have been giving them some lessons on these matters, to set them off to the best advantage; but still, there is a natural gracefulness about some which art cannot much improve—for instance, Fred's first partner, Miss Fairacre, who might pass muster even at Almack's—a crafty young scamp he is—always picking out the prettiest girl in the room. Take care of him, Mrs. Fortescue—he is a dangerous fellow, with those glossy curls—but not a bad boy at heart—(patting him on the back)—and I don't know what I could well do without him, sometimes. Well, Fred," addressing him, "I conclude you will be following Will's example pretty soon; and, mind, when you can find one like Blanche, in heart and disposition—fond of the country, and likely to make me a dutiful, affectionate niece, you shall have the Grange, and all the appurtenances belonging thereto, for your home, and something, in addition to your own property, to help to keep house—on these conditions, you may marry with my consent, but I don't intend to trust you out of the parish."

"Many thanks, my dear uncle, for your generous offer. You have ever been to me as a father, and I hope never to be far distant from dear old Bampton, where I have spent so many happy years."

"It will be your own fault if you are, my boy—and don't forget your duties to-night, in seeing that our guests are well cared for."

"No fear of that, uncle. Bob and myself don't intend to be idle."

Neither were they, either before, at, or after supper. At twelve precisely, the large dining-room and library, joined together by wide folding doors, were thrown open, displaying a long table, reaching down the centre, and two cross tables at each end, on which a profusion of good things was spread out, with wines of every description; and it were needless to remark that, the evening being very sultry, Conyers and Fred caused the champagne corks to pop about like irregular musket discharges of infantry. The company had fully discussed the merits of the good things provided for them, when Bob Conyers, as Vice-Chairman, proposed the toast of the evening in a short, appropriate speech :—"Health and happiness to the two newly-married couples!" which was received with deafening cheers, lasting for several minutes; and as they were dying away, the stentorian voice of Farmer Stiles was heard: "Now, gentlemen, one cheer more, as you love him, for the young squire; and may God bless them both."

The shout which answered this short address may be imagined, and the Earl, seeing the ladies almost overpowered by the thunder of voices, rose to return thanks, which stilled immediately the raging storm into breathless silence. The short, energetic speech of the old peer again elicited rounds of applause, although more subdued, from a hint passed up the long table by Conyers. "The Ladies'," and "The Earl's" health then followed in quick succession, after which dancing recommenced, and continued with unabated strength and resolution until four o'clock in the morning.

With the termination of these festivities and the departure of his guests from Bampton, the Earl relapsed into his usual quiet habits; but as Fred spent the greater part of his time at the Priory, often dining there, the loss of his children's society, and the solitary fireside in the evening, began to produce the effects which might have been expected upon one whose chief happiness depended on domestic ties and cheerful faces around his table. Fred, noticing his uncle's low spirits, induced him to ride over occasionally to the Priory, where his usual cheerfulness returned, and it was about three weeks after his children's marriage, that when walking with Mrs. Gordon through her grounds, he surprised that lady by suddenly saying, "My dear Mrs. Gordon, it is no use my attempting to conceal the matter any longer; but the fact is, that I have become so melancholy and feel so lonely in that large house since Will and Con have left me, that I must either come and live at the Priory, or you must come, in pity to my forlorn situation, and live at Bampton."

Mrs. Gordon, scarcely knowing whether the Earl was serious, or only in one of his joking humours, attempted to rally him for giving way to despondency on account of his children's short absence—but in vain. He assured her that his proposition had been well considered, and although now past the age for romantic passion, he had long entertained towards her the deepest regard and affection. "In short, my dear madam," he added, "your interest in my children is almost as deep as my own; and in return they regard you as their mother. What a joyful surprise it would be to them all, to find their hopes realised on their return home!"

"My dear friend," replied Mrs. Gordon, "your proposition has come so unexpectedly upon me, that I must have time for reflection before I can give you a decisive answer; but, believe me, I am not insensible to your many excellent qualities of heart and disposition."

Fred Beauchamp and the gay widow approaching, put a stop to the further efforts of the Earl in pressing his suit, and he had only time to entreat she would write him a favourable reply in a day or two, as his future happiness was now dependent on her consent.

Mrs. Gordon, uninfluenced by worldly considerations or ambitious views, felt sorely perplexed by the Earl's proposal. She was perfectly satisfied with her own position, and the thoughts of leaving her happy home, with every comfort and all her pets around her, produced such painful sensations, that she had nearly resolved on writing a refusal, although couched in the most friendly language, with cogent reasons for declining the honour he intended conferring upon her; when Lady Malcolm, observing her sister's unusual abstraction of thought and nervous manner, at last drew the secret from her, and the confession of the distressing situation in which she felt placed by being compelled to give pain to one she so highly respected, with the dread of that coolness which would naturally arise to destroy the harmony which had hitherto existed between the two families.

"My dear Margaret," continued Lady Malcolm, "you have not advanced one single reasonable excuse for your purposed rejection of the dear old Earl, to whom, I am convinced, you are much more deeply attached than you like to confess to me; in fact, I have long observed, since his visit to me in London, your evident partiality for each other. There is no necessity for giving up the Priory or your pets; but even if such a sacrifice were required, I should not hesitate in resigning all, rather than give up your oldest and dearest friend. Indeed, my dear sister, I am only surprised you could have hesitated for one moment to accept the Earl's offer, independently of the great pleasure it will afford those dear girls, Blanche and Constance, as well as myself. There will be times, of course, when Charles and William must be absent from this part of the country, leaving the Earl and yourself two solitary beings, in two old, solitary houses; so, my dear sister, putting feeling out of the question, the most prudent step you can possibly adopt is to marry the Earl, and you will then be a mutual comfort to each other in your declining years. Moreover, I know Charles would be only too glad to live at the Priory during five or six months of the year, if you will allow him, and you can depend on Constance keeping everything precisely in the same order as at present."

Mrs. Gordon, thinking her sister had spoken very sensibly on this subject, without alluding to rank or worldly advantages, thanked her for her good advice, which she agreed to follow, and a neatly-written little note was, in accordance therewith, dispatched the next day to Bampton, which brought the Earl to the Priory within an hour of its delivery, in high spirits. To those interested in love scenes between the youthful and ardent, the meeting of these two old friends, on this important matter, might appear too tame and sedate to be rehearsed; we will, therefore, pass it over *sub silentio*, and merely relate the result, that in a fortnight from that day, the Earl and Mrs. Gordon underwent the ceremony of being joined together in holy matrimony at the altar in Bampton Church, none, save Lady Malcolm, Mrs. Fortescue, Fred Beauchamp, and Conyers being present, and returned afterwards to Bampton House as if nothing extraordinary had happened, where Aunt Gordon assumed her new dignity of Countess of Annandale, without in any way changing her habitual cheerfulness and suavity of temper. There was not one of the old domestics in the Earl's establishment (old servants being generally extremely captious and impassive of innovations in their departments) who did not receive with unfeigned pleasure their new mistress, whose kindness of heart and generous disposition were so well known to all her inferiors. Lady Malcolm and Mrs. Fortescue returned the same day to London for a short time, promising to be at Bampton again the second week in September.

The news of the Earl's marriage with Mrs. Gordon caused very little surprise in the neighbourhood; the general opinion being the reverse of that so often pronounced on elderly persons "making fools of themselves." Here it was admitted to be "the wisest thing they could have done," by all save our not over-esteemed friend, Mrs. Harcourt, who was of course prepared with an ill-natured speech for the occasion, envenomed, no doubt, by the consideration of her quondam opponent taking precedence of her in all their country parties.

"Only think," she observed to her husband, "of Mrs. Gordon imposing upon that silly old man, and playing her cards so cleverly as to become a Countess? What extraordinary tact some widows have in match-making for themselves as well as others."

"Well, my dear, I do not blame her for making so good a bargain, although I have long suspected this event would take place sooner or later; and, in my opinion, the Earl has made a most judicious selection."

"Oh, yes, of course," retorted the lady; "the Bampton squire can do no wrong since his elevation to the peerage."

Mrs. Gordon had immediately, on accepting the Earl, written to apprise Blanche of her contemplated change of name, and on reading her aunt's letter, she exclaimed, "Oh, William! what do you think has occurred during our short absence from home?"

"Something, my darling, of a joyous nature, I can gather from your sparkling eyes. Perhaps Bob is married?"

"No, not yet."

"The widow has accepted Fred?"

"No, dear William; guess again."

"Then the governor has popped the question to aunty?"

"Oh, William," she said, demurely, "how could you fancy such a thing?"

"Because, my love, I have fancied it for some five or six months past, and was quite convinced it must soon happen."

"You were a true prophet, Master Will. Dear aunty will soon be in name what she has ever been in love and affection to us both—a mother."

"My own dear girl," said Beauchamp, catching her in his arms, "this is indeed delightful intelligence; for I often think with pain how melancholy my dear father must feel without his children, and we cannot now be always with him."

"And why can we not, dear William?"

"Because, my love, he thinks we ought to spend a certain portion of the year at the Castle, and he is too wedded to Bampton ever to leave it."

"Indeed," she said, "this is a very delightful place, but I confess my feelings, like his, are influenced by earlier and dearer associations; Bampton and Beauchamp are both hallowed names to me."

"Ah! you naughty child, since you have become Lady Beauchamp; but now, Blanche, seriously, we must proceed on our journey to visit your Scotch dominions, where I intend committing havoc amongst the grouse, and send a supply to our friends in England, that is, supposing you will allow me to be absent a few hours occasionally from your presence?"

"Well, I suppose, for such a purpose, I may dispense with your attendance sometimes; so now to answer aunty's letter, and I am then at your commands to set out *en route* for my fatherland."

By the 1st of September, Malcolm and Constance had engaged to spend a week with Beauchamp and his bride at Annandale Castle (before returning to Bampton), which they reached the 31st of August, in time for the first day of partridge shooting; and as usual, Malcolm began joking Blanche after dinner.

"Well, my love, how many quarrels have you had with Beauchamp since this day month?"

"None at all, Charles, nor likely to have any, I hope."

"'Pon honour, Blanche—eh?"

"Quite true, Charles."

"Oh! I see—Beauchamp gave in at once, poor fellow! anything for a quiet life—always was that sort of man—couldn't stand that little temper of yours, my dear—so knocked under without striking a blow—henpecked husband, and all that sort of thing."

"And pray, Charles, how did you fare with Constance?"

"All one way, my love—turned the bonnet-box out of window at starting—fought like cat and dog for a week, till she saw I *would* keep the upper hand, and now we go on swimmingly together, like the two old swans in the lake yonder. She know's who's master now—don't you, Con?" appealing to his wife.

"Yes, Charles," she replied, laughing, "I rather think I do," with a significant smile at her sister-in-law.

"Well," remarked Malcolm, "this boxing up of two individuals in a travelling carriage, for I know not how long, is all very well once in a man's life, and one degree better than solitary confinement in a prison—but, by Jove, Beauchamp, *tête-à-tête* breakfasts, with ditto dinners, don't suit my humour at all; so now I intend letting loose to-night—try every wine in the cellar, and finish off with a bottle of port per head. It's no use, my dears, sending to announce coffee, so go to your rooms when you please. We intend to have a jolly evening, and stagger up-stairs about one o'clock in the morning."

"You will do nothing of the kind, Charley dear," replied Blanche; "at least I am sure William will not."

"But he will, my love, and I'll back him up to assert his rights and supremacy, in defiance of petticoat government. Oh! la! how funny! my Lord Beauchamp carried up-stairs roaring drunk, and my Lady Beauchamp in hysterics."

"My dear Charles, how silly you still are!"

"Yes, my love—and always hope to be; so now pass the bottle, and I'll give a toast—bumpers round—'May we never feel less happy than now!'"

CHAPTER LI.

WHILST Beauchamp and Malcolm were walking over stubbles and turnips in search of partridges, Blanche and Constance were walking through the village, renewing their acquaintance with their poor neighbours; and many a silent blessing was invoked by the aged and infirm, the fatherless and widow, on the heads of those two sisters of charity, as they entered their humble cottages.

Blanche and Beauchamp had resolved on devoting a large portion of their income to ameliorate the condition of the dependents on their extensive properties; and in place of the wretched hovels and small tenements, the general habitations of the poor, new cottages were to be erected, on a plan drawn by themselves, which allowed of two good-sized front-rooms on the ground floor, with bakehouse, back-kitchen, &c., and a quarter of an acre of land to each cottage. New school-rooms, where wanted, were also to be provided—clothing clubs established in every village and hamlet on their estates, with a large subscription by themselves, and, in addition to Lord Beauchamp's name standing at the head of each club or benefit society, weekly provision was made by himself and Blanche for all widows, orphans, and those past labouring for their own support; so that of each it might be said in the words of Job, "When the ear heard me, then it blessed me; and when the eye saw me, it gave witness to me: because I delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him."

The management of the whole property in the north, around and belonging to the Castle, was entrusted by the Earl to his son, who would admit of no intervention between the tenants and himself, in the shape of a lawyer agent; in place of whom the best practical farmer in each district was appointed by him as an arbitrator in any trivial cases of dispute, and deputed to send him statements of any improvements required, in buildings or drainages on the farms; but when staying at the Castle applications were to be made to Lord Beauchamp, personally, on all matters of this kind, by the tenants themselves; thus the friendly relations, which ought ever to exist between the owner and cultivators of the soil, were established to the mutual benefit of both.

However high in rank any landlord may be, whether duke, marquis, or earl, he may rest assured that it is most unquestionably his interest, if not his duty, to hold the supreme authority over his property in his own hands, and not subject his tenants to be domineered over, and his lands deteriorated, by the pretended supervision of a lawyer agent, totally ignorant of all agricultural business, and who is paid a handsome per centage for merely collecting the rents, writing a few letters, or occasionally copying out some lease or agreement, framed by men of greater experience than himself. No man can be safely employed as land agent, who is not thoroughly and practically acquainted with the management and cultivation of land.

After spending a fortnight at Annandale Castle, the two thoroughly happy couples set out on their return to Bampton, where they were received with open arms and warm embraces by the Earl and his Countess. After these greetings had passed, Malcolm's habitual love of fun broke forth.

"Well, I fear I shall now become like the donkey who had two mammas."

"In what respect Charles?" asked Blanche.

"Why, he became a very great donkey indeed, my love."

"Oh, that you have ever been, Charles, since I have had the honour of your acquaintance."

"I tell you what it is, aunt, or mamma—whichever you choose to be called—that spoilt pet of yours has become so exceedingly gumptious since her promotion as Lady Beauchamp, that she rules the whole roast—will have her own way in everything; and as for her husband, poor fellow—oh! me—as Mrs. Winter says—she treats him like a dog; in short, it is a most fortunate thing for him to get her back to Bampton, where I hope you will now keep her in proper order once more."

"Very well, Charles," replied his aunt, "then I will take her to her room, and begin my first lecture."

It were almost superfluous to relate the joy of the Countess on hearing from her own lips the confession of Blanche's happiness in her union with Beauchamp.

"Then I have not over-rated him, my own dearest child?"

"Oh, no, dear aunt—he is so kind, so affectionate, so anxious about me, that I love him, if possible, more every day."

"Thank heaven for this blessing, my darling girl," exclaimed her aunt, pressing Blanche to her heart.

"Indeed, I do," she replied, "every hour in the day."

"And Constance, my love," turning to her, "I read in your happy smiles that Charles also makes you a good husband."

"Yes, dear aunt; he is everything I could desire."

The family-party at the dinner-table that evening was the most joyous that can be imagined, all being in the highest spirits from their happy re-union; but Malcolm's mirth, as usual, was most boisterous. The next day, Bob Conyers and Selina rode over to congratulate their friends on returning to Bampton; and the latter, remarking on Blanche's improved looks and vivacity of spirits, said, "Why, my dear girl, I was beginning to think matrimony a very lugubrious affair, and have put off that little ceremony with Bob as long as possible; but, really, my dear, whether from change of air or change of name, Lady Beauchamp beats Blanche Douglas hollow, with those sparkling eyes and blooming cheeks, which I never saw so brilliant before."

"Oh, Selina, I know what flattery from you means—but, as long as William is satisfied with my looks, I do not regard the opinions of others."

"Indeed, my dearest Blanche, I am perfectly serious and sincere; for I never saw a girl so improved as you are since your marriage."

"Then, my dear Selina," said Bob, "the sooner you follow her example the better—so let us name this day fortnight, and I am sure all our friends here, old and young, will come over to see the last of the old bachelor, Bob Conyers."

All joyfully accepting this invitation, Selina added, "You must ask mamma *this* question, Bob—the *first*, I answered for myself."

This point having been referred, accordingly, to Lady Markham, she raised no objection; being, like some other mammas, of opinion that the marriage of their eldest daughter opens the path of the other junior sisters to the hymeneal altar. Sir Lionel gave a grand breakfast on the occasion, which was attended by nearly all the neighbouring families, including a large party from Bampton, now augmented by the arrival of Lady Malcolm and Mrs. Fortescue. Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt were invited also; and, although with a bad grace, they deemed it a good opportunity for renewing that intimacy with their neighbours which the revelations made at the late trial had somewhat discomposed.

Having left their cards at Bampton since their ward's return, the meeting between aunt and aunt was less *cat-like* than heretofore; and that between aunt and niece, apparently, rather affectionate. Mr. Harcourt, perhaps more sinned against than sinning in the Marston Castle plot, and devoid of the acrimonious feeling still entertained by his wife against Lord Beauchamp, shook him most cordially by the hand, congratulating him upon Blanche's improved looks and more cheerful manner. In fact, the change in Lady Beauchamp struck every one of her old acquaintance as most extraordinary. But was there not a cause? She had exchanged the harassing anxieties of the last twelve months for peace and security of mind, and, when leaning on her husband's arm, looked the personification of happiness and contentment; and the soft, confiding smile directed to Beauchamp's face said, in plain language, "With him I have found a haven and a rest." Lord Mervyn had, long before the trial, left Marston Castle for Paris, where he was to be joined by his son-in-law, Vernon, and his young wife, to pass the winter. The shock inflicted on Vernon's frame (never very strong) caused great misgivings in his physician's mind as to his entire re-establishment in health ever again; and a warmer climate being recommended, he was to pass the intermediate time in Italy, before joining his father-in-law at Paris.

The marriage ceremony between the Captain and Miss Honoria was, by the particular desire of Mrs. Winterbottom, solemnised at St. George's Chapel, followed by a long account of the loveliness of the bride and her bridesmaids, &c., the next day, in the *Morning Post;* and a *déjeuner* provided on a large scale from Gunter's, for their London friends and connections, at their own house in Bryanston Square, which had undergone new decorations for the brewer and his wife, who both, after a fair trial, found a country life not at all to their taste, and the reverse of what they expected—the lady complaining of being shut up, during the winter months, like an owl in a barn, without a neighbour dropping in once a month. In short, Mr. Winterbottom had committed an egregious mistake by purchasing landed property in a locality surrounded by old, stiff-necked families, who would not visit his vulgar wife; and she felt most acutely the change (having no resources in herself) from the gossip and prattle of London to the dull monotony of a country life. At last she told her husband—to use her own expression—"she wouldn't put up, no longer, with the hoity-toity airs of these proud dames." The country house, therefore, was handed over to the young couple, with the reservation of spending a month there in the summer, and a week or two at Christmas.

The young widow, after another month's deliberation, accepted Fred Beauchamp, with the Grange, who being of a domestic turn and good temper, rather surpassed her expectations from his apparently thoughtless demeanour, which really proceeded from good humour and cheerfulness of disposition.

* * * *

The 1st of November has again arrived; again is the breakfast-table at Bampton House thronged with guests in hunting costume. Sir Francis Burnett, Gwynne, with every member of the hunt, are there, in compliment to the Earl and his son, on their opening day, and a greater assemblage of farmers than ever before attended the lawn meet. Sir Francis whispered Beauchamp, "So, my boy, you have changed your opinion about the heiress since this time twelvemonth?"

"No, Sir Francis, of her I have ever entertained one and the same opinion; but I have followed your advice in disregarding that of the world."

"Right, my boy, quite right; the world and his wife have nothing to do with you and your wife."

After breakfast, the Ladies Beauchamp and Malcolm were vaulted into their saddles by their respective lords, to see the hounds thrown into covert, attended by a large party of gentlemen—the Earl taking charge of his daughter-in-law when Beauchamp began drawing for a fox. The horse provided for Blanche was such as a child could ride, of the most gentle and docile disposition, although quite thorough-bred, and a perfect hunter; yet withal, Beauchamp, disliking to see ladies riding over fences, and in dread of any accident occurring to his beloved wife, had exacted a promise from her to return home with the groom as soon as the hounds should leave Park Wood. Selina Conyers, in no wise sobered by marriage, ridiculed Beauchamp for his timidity about Blanche, to as much purpose as heretofore; and Blanche, wishing Selina a good day's sport and a safe return to Bampton, turned her horse's head homewards.

The Park Wood foxes, being proverbially stout, and long travellers, almost invariably afforded capital runs, and although so early in the season, the one selected on this day had resolved to maintain the reputation of his family, although at the cost of his life, being pulled down in the open after an hour and fifty minutes. With blind ditches and close weather, every horse had quite or more than sufficient work to keep anywhere near the pack with their first fox, without requiring a second; and their riders, being in this case disposed to let well alone, did not express dissent to the order—home.

The dinner party at Bampton in the evening was on a large scale, about thirty sitting down to table; the Countess (late Mrs. Gordon) performing her part in the entertainment with her usual affability, supported by her two pets, Blanche and Constance, who won golden opinions from all their guests by their unaffected manners and cheerful good humour.

After the ladies had retired, Bob Conyers gave the toast usual on such occasions—"Fox-hunting and the Master of the Hounds"—which was received with general applause.

"Gentlemen," said Conyers, rising, after silence had succeeded, "there is one toast more I must be allowed to propose on this most auspicious day, which I am quite sure will be received with enthusiasm—'The Countess of Annandale, and the Ladies Beauchamp and Malcolm.'"

"Hurrah!" shouted Gwynne, springing to his legs, "a double bumper to them—they are the right sort, Bob, like the Park Wood foxes, and endeavour to combine the pleasures of 'The Field and the Fireside.'"

"And now," continued Conyers, when the cheers had subsided, "our labours of love having been brought to a happy termination, I will wind up, on behalf of the newly made Benedicts, in the words of Cotton:—

'Though fools spurn Hymen's gentle powers,
We, who improve his golden hours,
    By sweet experience know
That marriage, rightly understood,
Gives to the tender and the good
    A paradise below.'"

THE END.

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